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STAR WARS
STAR WARS

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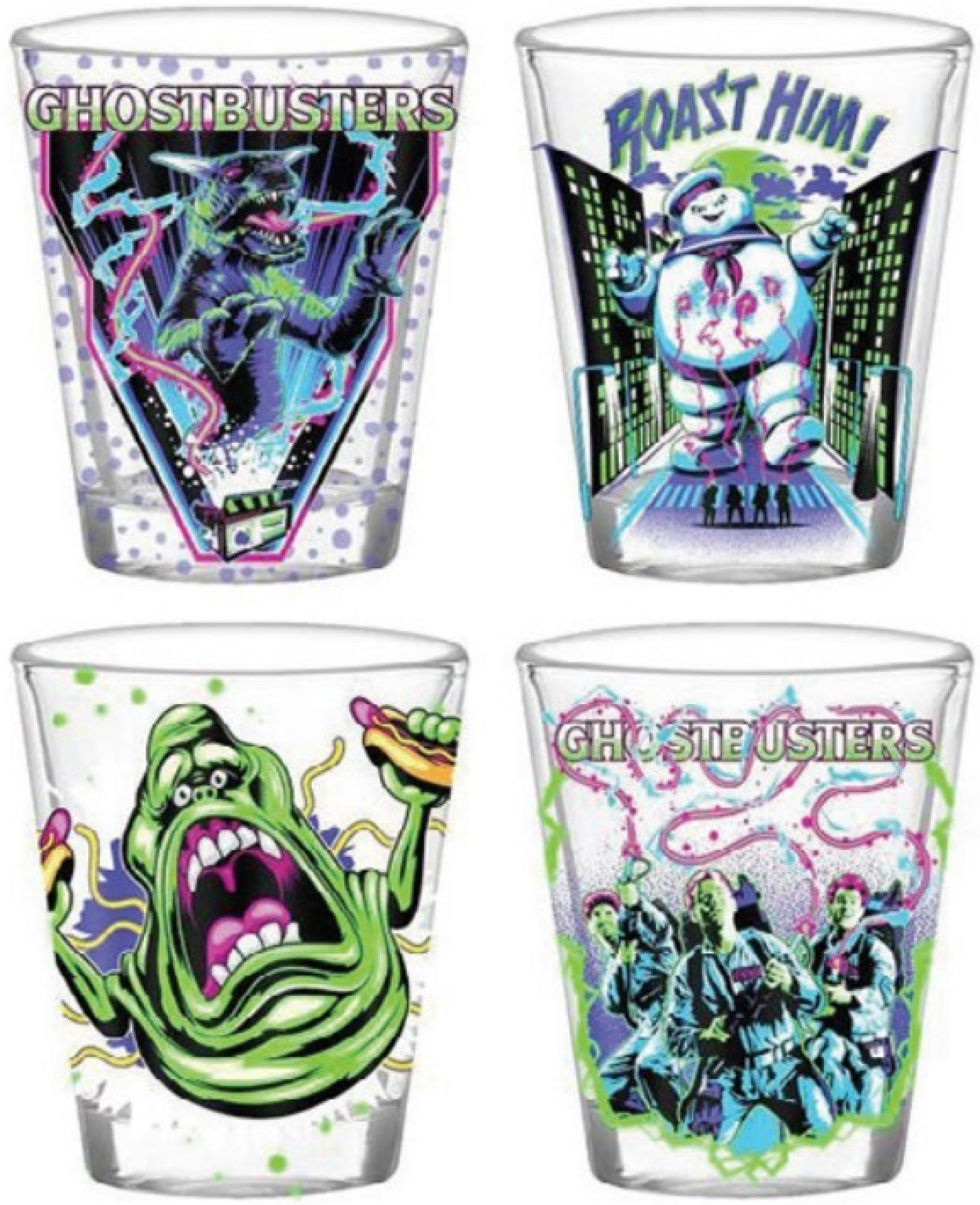

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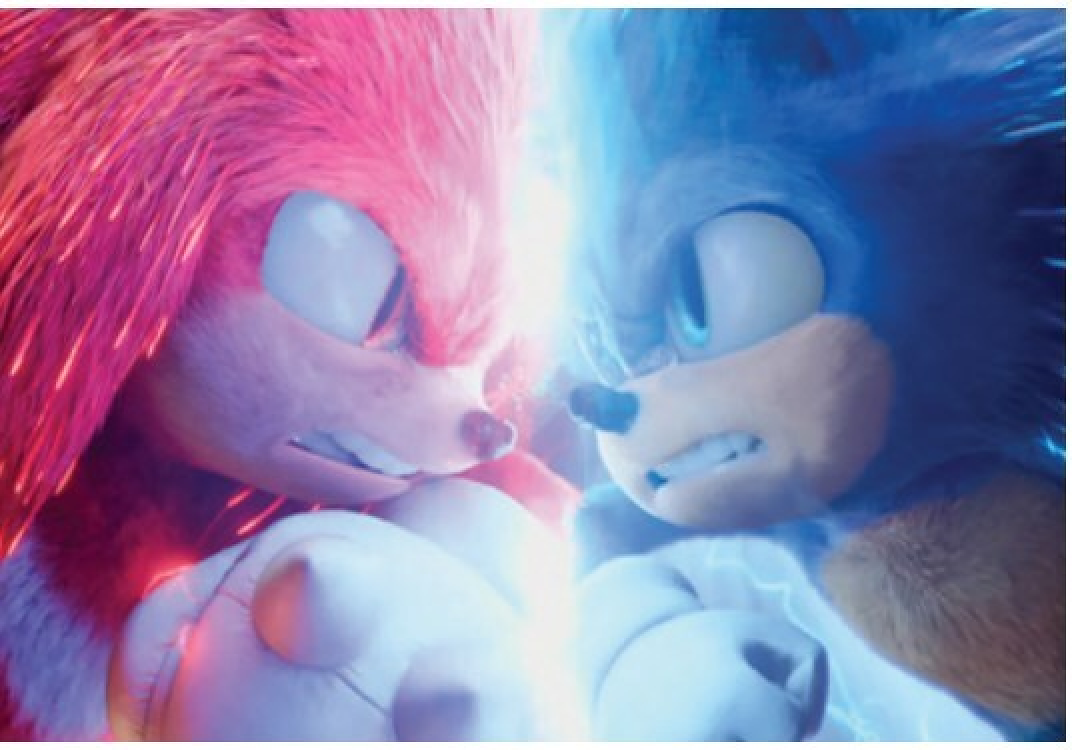
EDITOR'S NOTE

VIDEO GAME MOVIES ARE IMPORTANT



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG CAN'T SHAKE HIS NOSTALGIA. I've carried this thought for decades. Whenever a new Sonic game hits the market, I see his history as the primary selling point. The games that pay homage to the classics fare better than those trying to evolve beyond the original trappings. I was convinced Sonic's footprint in games would always be of the Sega Genesis mold. Sega tried to move Sonic forward, even turning him into a werehog and sending him to King Arthur's realm. However, the reality is: people only seem to care about Sonic running fast from left to right and through a loop.

And then the *Sonic the Hedgehog* movie hit in 2019. I saw it. I enjoyed it. But I didn't think it was a *Sonic* movie. It had little to do with his universe; I believe any animated animal could have stepped into his shoes and it would have worked just as well. Pitch: Alvin and his chipmunk friends are from a different dimension, and that's why they can talk. Sure. That idea is as true to Alvin's history as the *Sonic* movie is to Sonic's.

While the first *Sonic* movie was a fun, family-friendly experience, it pulled very little from the actual games. *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* is a whole other story. I adore this film. It does the character justice like no video game movie before it.

Much like Jim Carrey's interpretation of Dr. Robotnik evolving from an eccentric scientist to the magnificent mustachioed villain, Paramount knew what fans wanted from the sequel and didn't hold back on diving deep into Sonic's universe. Tails. Knuckles. The Chaos Emeralds. It's all wonderfully integrated, and the floodgates appear wide open for whatever comes next.

After a second viewing of the movie, I wanted to play another Sonic game – a desire that hasn't burned within me since the Sega Genesis days. It impressed me so much that I am now back into Sonic's fandom. We can laugh and groan over how bad video game movies typically are, but they matter. And if done right, they can have an impact, even on someone like me who's spent decades with Sonic. Video games deserve better in the movie space. I hope other movie studios holding video game licenses take a good look at what fans enjoy and do games justice.

I now find myself excited about the next *Sonic* film, the TV show spin-off, and the next video game: Sonic Frontiers, an experience that will again try to break new ground for this iconic character. We'll have more on this exciting title in next month's issue.

ANDREW REINER
Editor-In-Chief

WHAT I'M PLAYING
Fortnite,
Elden Ring,
MLB The Show 22

WHAT I'M WATCHING
Severance,
From, Moon Knight

WHAT I'M READING
Wynd, Captain
America, Mazebook

MOST PLAYED MULTIPLAYER GAME
Overwatch

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THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

On April 25, we held virtual meetings with Striking Distance Studios' founder and CEO Glen Schofield and the team behind The Callisto Protocol. We talked about the science fiction and horror that bring this terrifying new game to life as well as Schofield's journey into a desert to find inspiration for this Dead Space spiritual successor.

The cover art for this issue took roughly six months to create. The first option Striking Distance proposed was far too gory for our cover. Editor-in-Chief Andrew Reiner then suggested a closeup of protagonist Jacob Lee's face with the horror obscured within his helmet. Striking Distance loved the idea of the closeup, but wanted the horror to be lurking in a more terrifying way and put a creature behind Jacob. The inspiration came from an *Incredible Hulk* comic book with the Hulk reflected in Wolverine's claws.

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Wesley LeBlanc

Associate Editor

How do we not have a pirate RPG yet? Sea of Thieves is great, but its focus is online multiplayer. The upcoming Skull & Bones looks fine, but it's about ship combat. You can play as Dragonborns, Tarnished warriors, Buster Sword soldiers, and more in RPGs, but if you want to play as a pirate who fights with a cutlass and flintlock, your best bet is 2013's Assassin's Creed Black Flag. Just give me the Caribbean, a customizable ship and pirate, and a swashbuckling adventure, and I'll never ask for another game.

Jon Woodey

Web Designer/Programmer

Ever since patch 5.2 of Final Fantasy XIV, I have essentially lived inside Eorzea, and Endwalker has made sure to extend my stay. I cleared my first full raid tier with the expansion drop, and now my raid group is turning our sights to clearing every Ultimate fight. Beating the game's hardest content brings such a gratifying feeling, and we are all looking forward to conquering the bosses that await us. Dragonsong's Reprise looks to be a great challenge after we conquer the older fights.

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spotlight

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Two decades have passed since Sora first took up the Keyblade. Join us as we look back at the 20 years of stories and characters that have made up the sprawling Kingdom Hearts timeline.

26 **SWITCHING THINGS UP**

For years, Reggie Fils-Aimé was the affable face of Nintendo of America. With Mario behind him and a new memoir out, we caught up with the executive to talk about his career at Nintendo and recent foray into writing books.

36 **COVER STORY – THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL**

The creator of Dead Space, Glen Schofield, is returning to space-based horror with The Callisto Protocol. We saw the game in action, talked with the development team, and are ready to tell you all about it.

52 **THE INVINCIBLE**

We had a chance to play and talk to the team behind The Invincible – a new, narratively dense game from Starward Industries, made up of former CD Projekt Red and Techland developers.

80 **KIRBY AND THE WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE**

Players love Nintendo's pink puff powerhouse but there's so much more to his legacy than just Smash Bros. and his recent games. To celebrate 30 years of people-pleasing platformers, we look back on Kirby's illustrious history.

regulars

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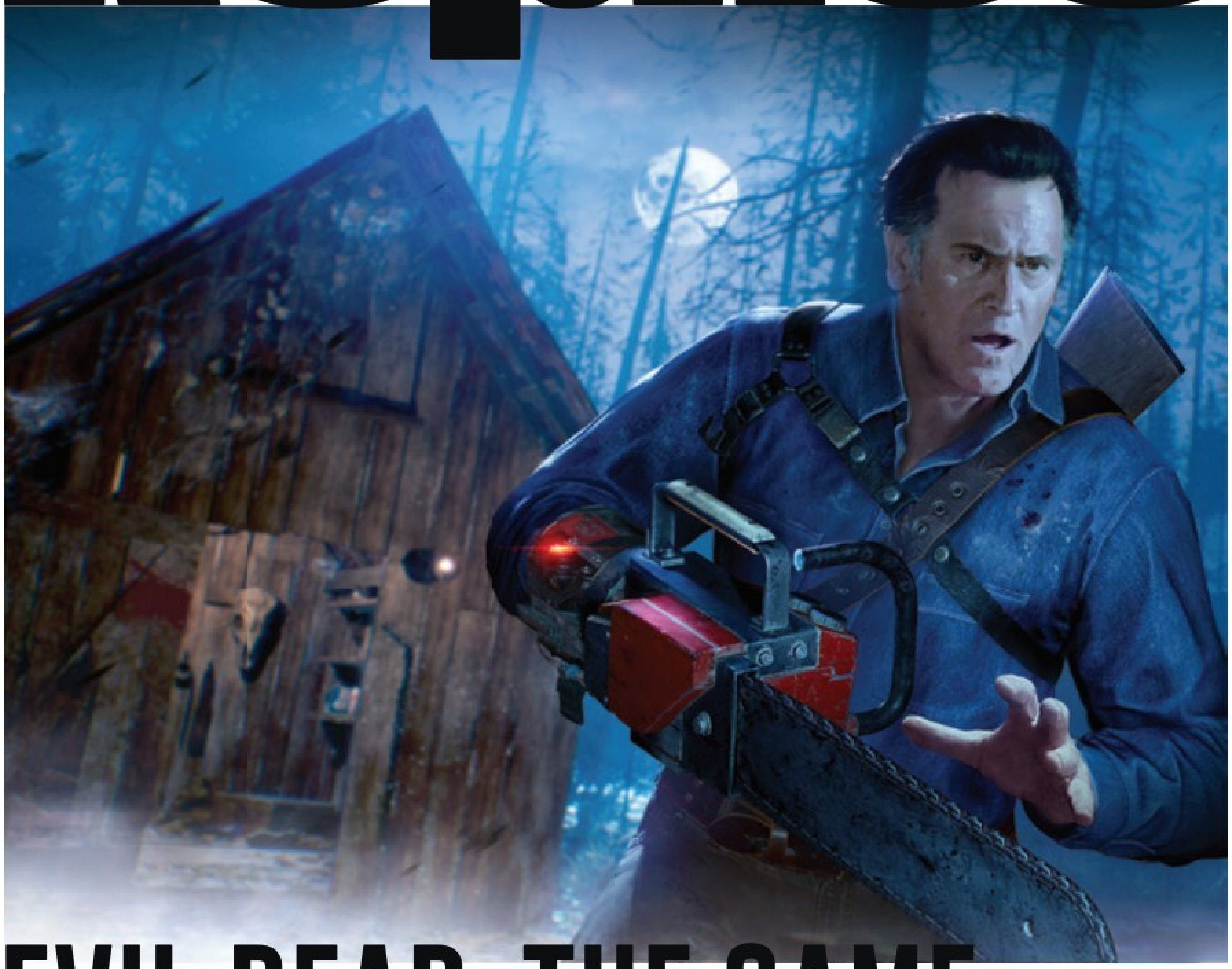
Replies



EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

The horror genre is one of gaming's strongest. From the suspenseful thrillers to the splatterfests, we are spoiled with jump scares and amazing chainsaw-abusing gameplay. Evil Dead looks like it's going to scratch many horror itches and also deliver awesome fan service. I cannot wait to stomp on some mini Ashes! Thanks for the great story! **– Jenna Wells, Valdez, AK**

I'm not big into asymmetrical multiplayer, but I do love the Doom games. Hearing that Evil Dead is made by a group of ex-id Software developers has my interest piqued. I watched some of the videos you posted on YouTube, and it appears to have that same refreshingly-smooth framerate. It also looks drop-dead gorgeous (in a really disturbing way). I tried playing Friday the 13th and Dead by Daylight, but the tech just wasn't there to back up the concept. If Evil Dead videos represent real gameplay, having seasoned veterans that made Doom games could be a huge gamechanger for the genre. What's your take, *GI*? **– Ricardo Venstrom, Stowe, VT**

↳ *We were blown away by the Evil Dead gameplay we saw during our cover story. We feel it has a shot at hanging with the genre's heavy hitters, most notably Dead by Daylight. It does enough to separate it from the pack, and as you pointed out, is backed by impressive tech. Our big concern is variety. Is the* Evil Dead *license enough to keep people returning to the game? Dead by Daylight's success, in part, comes from how frequently it adds new horror icons to the mix. There can only be so many versions of Ash players can unlock. Evil Dead may have to follow suit.*

ENDEMIC GAMING

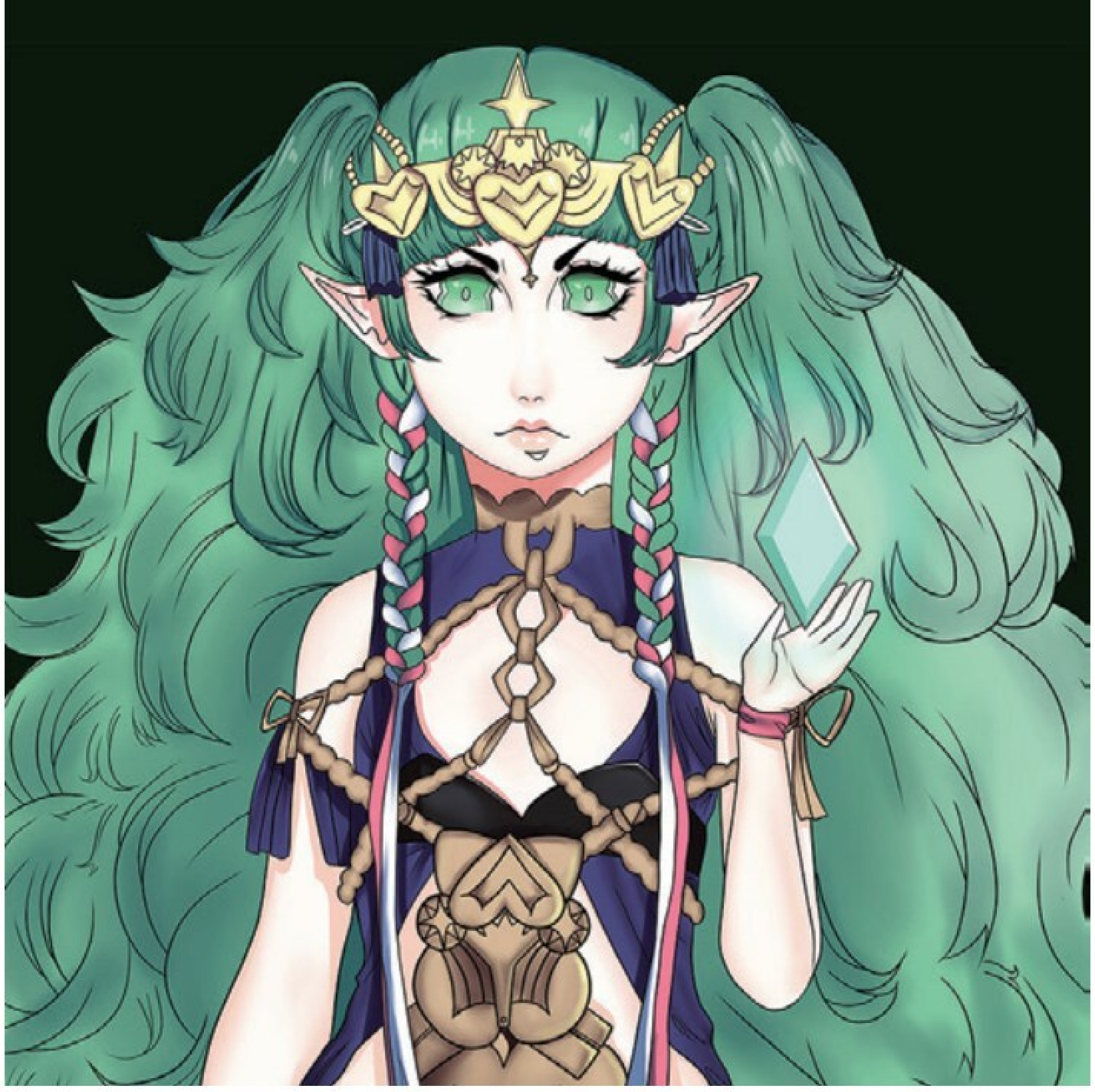
I don't see life getting back to the way it used to be before the pandemic. Before the lockdowns, I would go to QuakeCon every year. My long-distance gaming friends would gather there for a weekend of gaming. Bethesda just announced this event is going to be virtual again this year. Large gatherings like QuakeCon scream of super-spreader events, and I understand why Bethesda made this decision. I'm sad that one of my favorite times of the year is gone. Do you think QuakeCon and similar conventions will get back to the "old days"? **– Anonymous**

↳ *We're hoping things get back to "normal," but recent gaming conventions like GDC were spreading grounds for COVID. Numerous people in the industry believe they contracted the virus there and have shown hesitation to attend similar events any time soon. While some group gatherings, like professional sports and concerts, have returned close to pre-pandemic states, others are still lagging behind and may not ever return to what they were. All we can do is be as safe as possible until then. If COVID is endemic, we'll need to learn how to live with it, and that may mean a different approach to large gatherings like QuakeCon.*

FORTNITE

Moon Knight was just added as a playable character in Fortnite (complete with his Mr. Knight alternative look). I now have over 25 Marvel characters in the game, and they all look amazing! Is Fortnite quickly becoming one of the best Marvel experiences out there? **– Leonard Tatum, Mesquite, TX**

↳ *Yes, we are impressed by the number of Marvel heroes and villains in Fornite, but no, we don't feel it is a great superhero experience. The character details and animations are spot on, but when it comes to action, they all run around with the same guns. Spider-Man using a gun doesn't make much sense. We'd agree with you if all the characters used their iconic moves.*



Reader art submission: Emily Dejesus

LEGO DIMENSIONS

I don't think we truly understood how lucky we were to get a game like Lego Dimensions. Not only did that game unite a bunch of licenses that had no business being together – like Portal and *The Goonies* – but we got AWESOME Lego sets for each of them ... and there were dozens of them! I know I can safely say something of this scale with a partner like Lego will never happen again. **– Heather Lawrence, via email**

SPORTS GAMES NEED TO CHANGE

I purchase MLB The Show every year and I think the world of this series, but I'm so sick of starting over with the card collecting in Diamond Dynasty. All of that work I put into my team is wiped clean each year. It's such a buzzkill. Why can't the cards I collected in previous years carry over in some capacity? For online play, Sony could offer two modes of play for cards: current and legacy. I believe the first sports game that starts doing this is going to see a huge uptick in players. My annoyance must be one of the biggest ones every year-to-year player experiences.

– Jason Tabke, La Pointe, WI

↳ ***In the years ahead, we wouldn't be surprised if one of the major sports games moves away from a yearly release model and adapts a living game formula that receives continual support and big updates at the beginning of that sport's professional season. Under that direction, we could see the card collection persisting and adopting an expansion model. Blizzard's Hearthstone is a good example of how a card-based game can continue to grow and still value its oldest cards.***

↘ **Join the conversation**

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com

Soundoff:

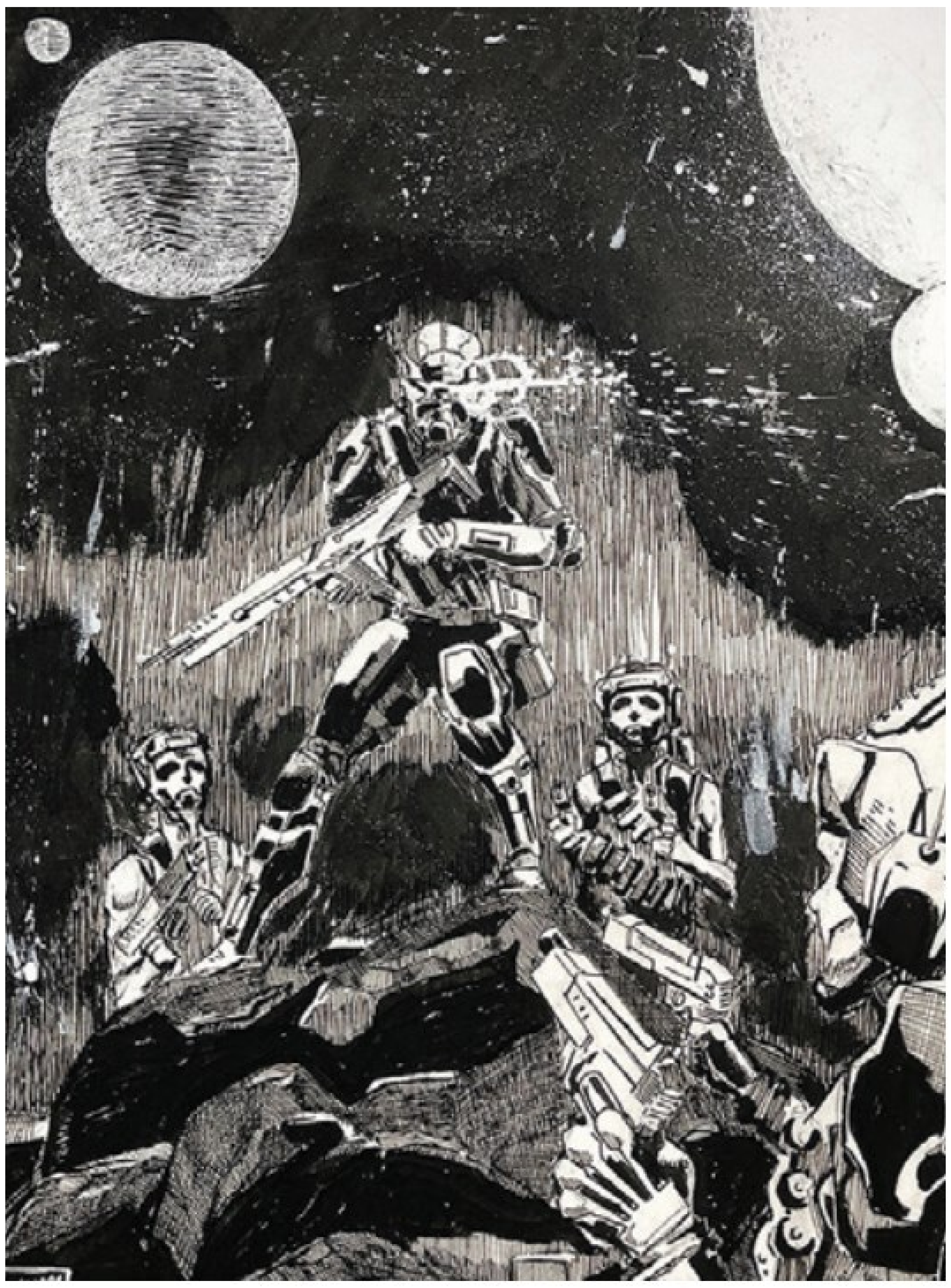
We asked our Instagram community which ally they want to see debut in Kingdom Hearts IV. Here are some of their desired teammates and amusing responses:

No more Disney. They should start going into game worlds. I thought that maybe with the whole Verum Rex thing that would be the series' future. Imagine going from Chrono Trigger to Vagrant Story, then to Xenogears instead of into Disney movies. **– Cho_co_Bear93**

Bring back the Final Fantasy characters. Give us some difficulty and real crossover similar to how it was in Kingdom Hearts 2.5 Final Mix. **– JonesIsDead**

Encanto! *Encanto*! *Encanto*!!! Maybe Bruno? But we don't talk about Bruno. **– FireBombino**

I just want a story that makes some semblance of sense. **– gpbieb**



Reader art submission: Micah Jeansonne

Soundoff:

We asked our Discord community to name their favorite video game development studio. Here are a few of the responses:

Firaxis for the games and releasing them on MacOS. Love strategy games, and Sid Meiers' Pirates is a gem. Bethesda is a close second for their open-world RPG experiences.
– Biscuits With Davey

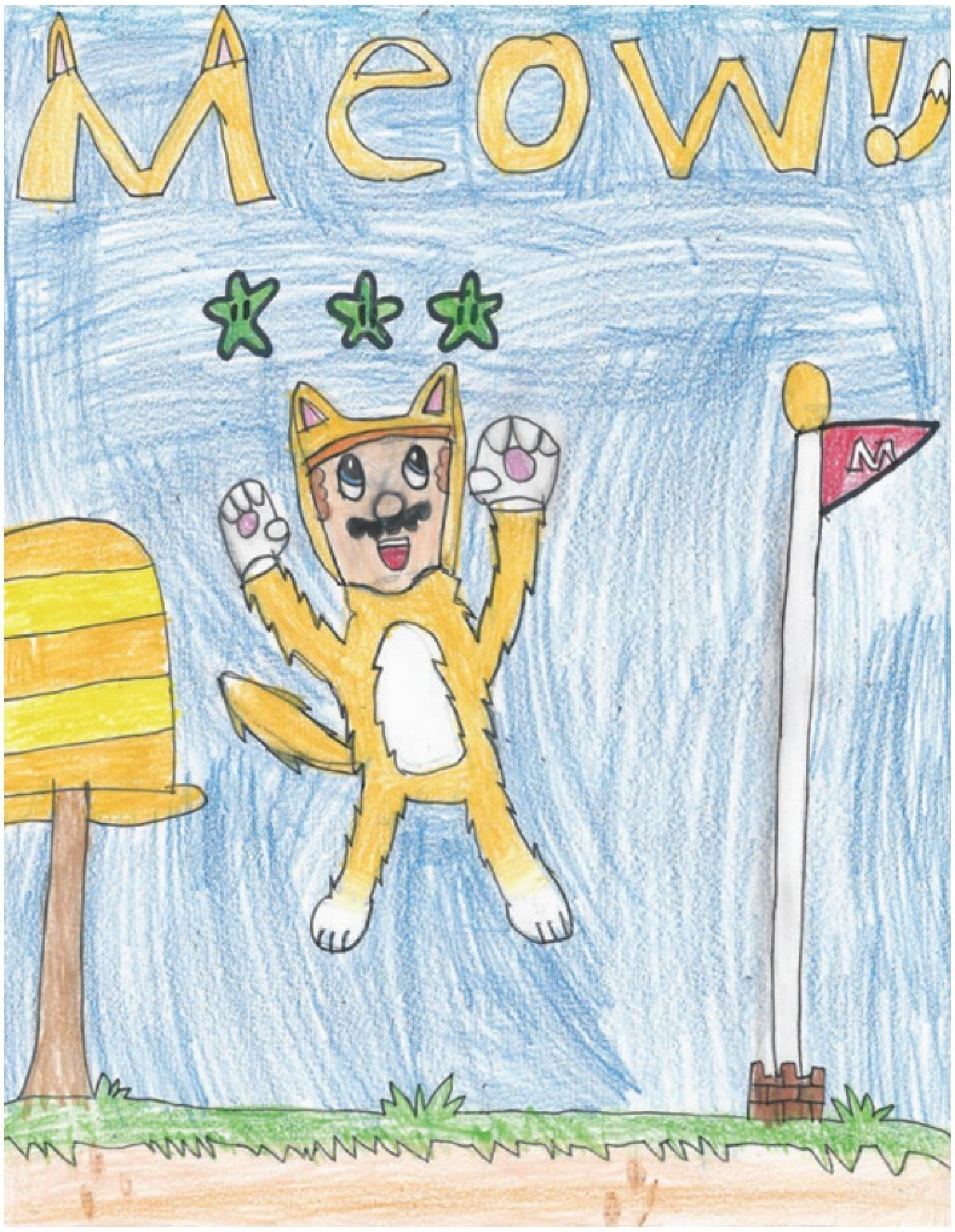
Square Enix! They've made incredible RPG titles (Final Fantasy, Kingdom Hearts, and more) and smaller, more experimental games such as Dungeon Encounters. While not everything from Square Enix is great, most of their titles are fantastic. **– Evan1Sonic**

There are few studios where I see their logo and know there's a quality game inside that package (R.I.P. Treasure, Pandemic Studios, Working Designs, Neversoft, Black Isle, LucasArts, and Konami). But one which still manages to consistently output great stuff for me is Atlus. Every time I see that logo, I know I'm in for a great experience, and the action and role-playing elements are going to be rock solid. Absolutely love their stuff. **– Noah**

I love Machine Games. The Wolfenstein games do some incredibly brave things with their storytelling while also being a shooter that feels as precise as a PC shooter on console. They make shooting nazis *quite* satisfying. Looking forward to seeing their take on Indiana Jones. **– thentomwaslike**

Yacht Club! They're always so passionate and transparent about their projects and always put out banger after banger. They're a developer I can usually trust to enjoy their games 100 percent, and it's why Mina the Hollower is my current most anticipated game. **– Leafeon**

Insomniac Games is a studio I trust with my gaming life at this point. Everything I've had the pleasure of playing has been excellent and has made me want to continue diving into their older games. They perfectly balance difficulty with fun and their games usually have me grinning from ear-to-ear multiple times per play session. Can't say enough how much I have enjoyed their work. **– Luke Skywalkr**



Reader art submission: Zoey Post, age 10

STAR TREK: RESURGENCE

Most Star Trek video games focus on action. Controlling a starship and blasting off photon torpedoes is about as good as it gets. Running around with a phaser is as bad. Action is not what Star Trek does well in movies or TV shows. It's about the people making up the crew and their time on the starship. That's why I am excited for Star Trek: Resurgence. It looks like the first game that truly embraces what this license is about. For decades, developers were trying to push a square block through a circular hole with Star Trek. Let's hope Dramatic Labs understands this development assignment.
– Captain Brad, via email

↳ *We have high hopes for Star Trek: Resurgence, and love seeing more developers enter the adventure game space. We haven't gotten our hands on much gameplay yet, but Dramatic Labs says Resurgence will offer significant player choice, branching storylines, and over-the-shoulder, third-person gameplay. It also features some action like shuttle piloting and phaser-based combat. Dramatic Labs teases we will see some familiar faces, yet the crew you interact with is all new.*

ELDEN RING KING

I've never finished a game more than twice before, but I am now on my fourth playthrough of Elden Ring. If this game doesn't win Game of the Year, I have to question what is wrong with the world.**– Mikah O'Connell, via email**

SHORTER GAMES

I've gotten to that point in life where I prefer shorter games to fit in those rare quiet moments in the day. More and more, I find myself drawn to indie games that give satisfying, complete-but-short experiences. My wife has been playing Elden Ring since it came out and is loving it, but I've played through seven or so games in that time. Iconoclasts, Evoland, and Cosmic Star Heroine may not get the same attention as bigger titles, but they are great games to be sure. And while I still love and hope to get to some of the longer experiences in my back catalog, I find more and more that there is a lot of filler that goes into many of those games **– Rick, Bloomfield, NJ**

↳ ***Numerous** Game Informer **staffers endorse your pick for Iconoclasts, a highly underappreciated platformer/adventure game with a heck of an ending. One of the beautiful things about games is the varying length of each. You can spend 200 hours exploring a world or just a few interacting with an amazing story. If you haven't played it yet, we recommend Children of Morta as a 10-15 hour game that we think you'll adore.***

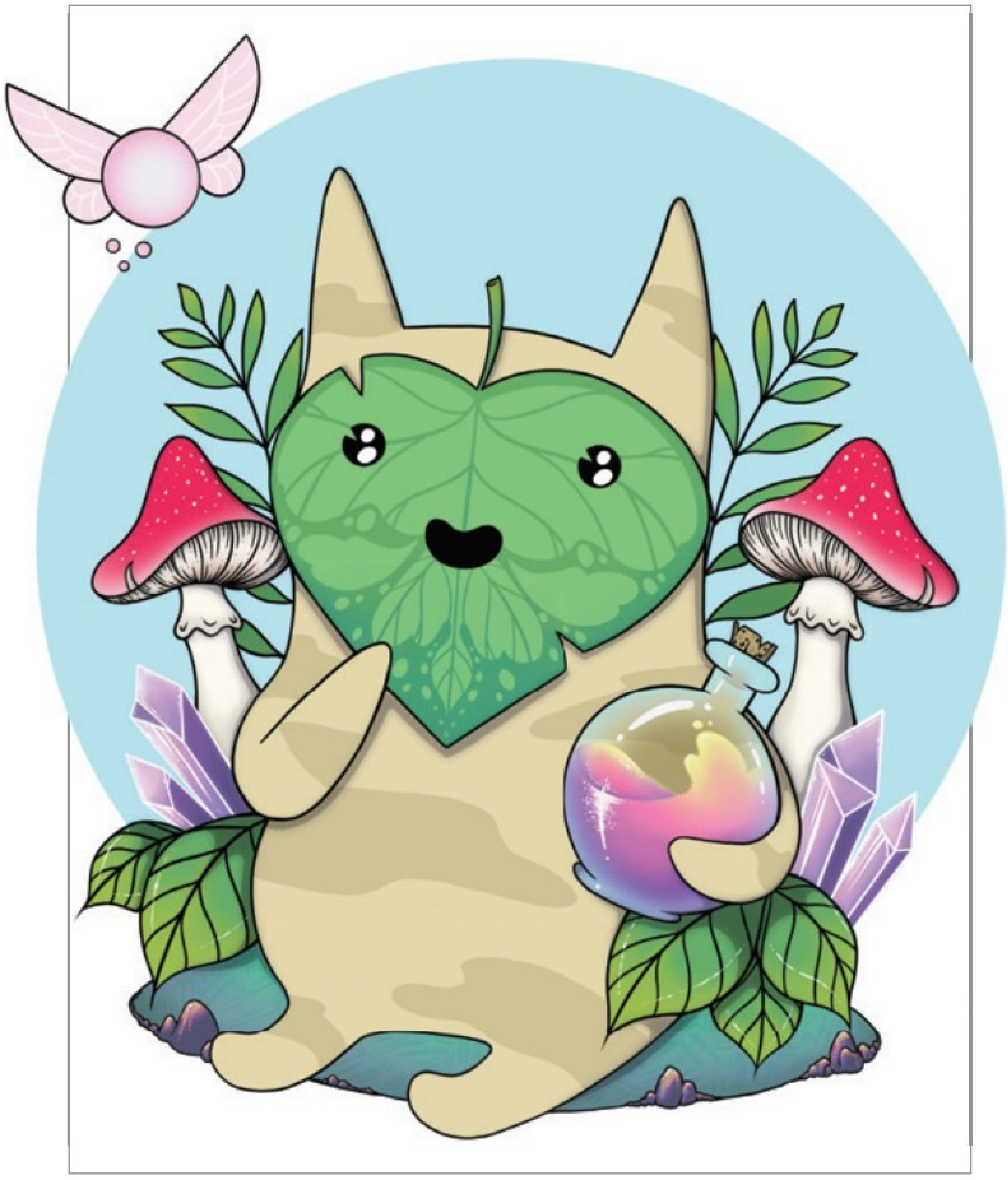
HALO TV

The stories in the Halo games are sci-fi gibberish. The TV show that draws inspiration from those games isn't perfect, but at least the story makes sense. For that, I think it's the best Halo story yet. *(Runs away)* **– Dwayne C., via email** ■

THE LORD OF THE RINGS ONLINE

My jaw is on the floor. The Lord of the Rings Online is still up and running! I recently saw the game celebrated its 15th anniversary, and I wonder who is still playing it? I haven't heard anything about the game for what feels like a decade, yet it must be profitable to keep going. What a quiet (and kind of cool) success story! **– Lianna Orenth, via email**

↳ ***Talking to a few The Lord of the Rings Online players, they say the game boasts a great community and offers a wealth of fantastic content. In celebration of the 15th anniversary, a large chunk of that content is now free to play, allowing newcomers to reach level 95 without paying a cent. The Lord of the Rings Online is a success and its path there doesn't seem like it should have been possible. In 2016, Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment handed the publishing rights over to Daybreak Game Company, with development also moving from Turbine to Standing Stone Games. Thankfully, a good number of the staff at Standing Stone worked at Turbine and were able to keep the game running without many hitches.***



Reader art winner: Brandey Albanese

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CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF KINGDOM HEARTS

How an unexpected, magical collaboration captivated gamers for two decades **BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE**

"WHEN THE HEARTLESS CAME, THAT'S WHEN EVERYTHING CHANGED."

From these words in the very first Kingdom Hearts game, who could have predicted the wild roller coaster ride the series would become? Part of what makes Square Enix and Disney's collaboration so endearing is its mind-blowing existence. And the fact that the action/RPG's sprawling narrative kept fans tuned in for 20 years – no matter how big or small the reveal. With such a milestone under its belt, we look back on the series with a lot of heart.

ENTERING KINGDOM HEARTS

◇◇◇◇◇◇◇

It started with an elevator pitch, literally.

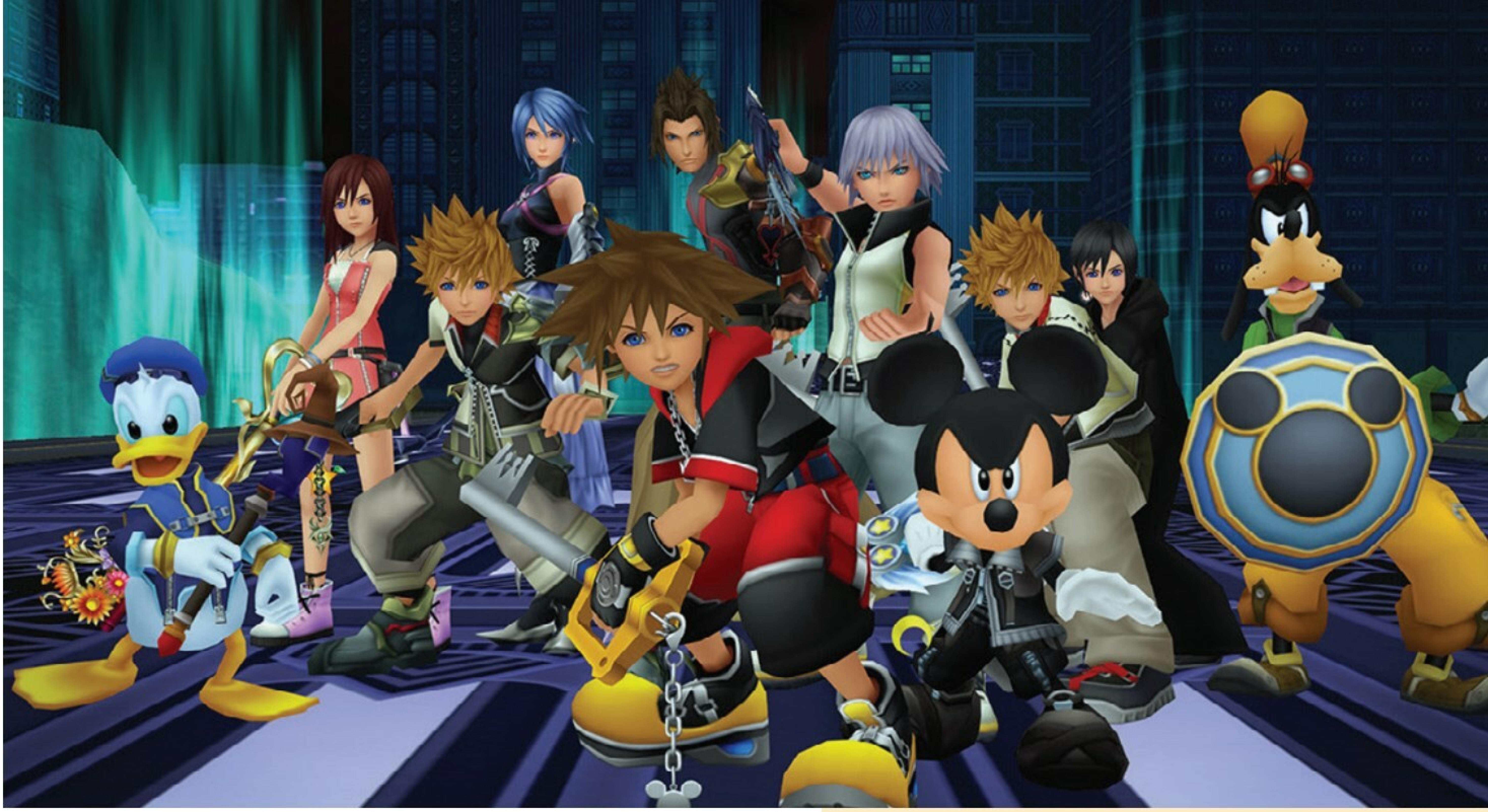
As revealed in a 2004 *IGN* interview, producer Shinji Hashimoto met a Disney executives on an elevator ride. At the time, Square Enix and Walt Disney Japan's offices shared the same building. Hashimoto made the most of his elevator ride and pitched the executive on a collaboration. This unexpected meeting set into motion the Kingdom Hearts we know and love today.

Kingdom Hearts is now a juggernaut series with thirteen installments and 35 million copies shipped worldwide. However, the project was initially met with skepticism; people didn't know what to make of a game bringing beloved Disney and Final Fantasy characters together in a new universe. The unlikely combo seemed messy; even the thought of fusing a more mature series like Final Fantasy with the wholesome Disney brand was odd to envision. How would Square Enix pull that off?

Tetsuya Nomura, who was getting more recognition after his work on Final Fantasy VII, was up for the challenge. Nomura stepped into the director role for the first time in his career, and has worked on the series ever since. Nomura became the heart of the series, taking us on a journey starring the always-positive Sora and his devotion to saving his friends. "He is a very bright character in general," Nomura told us in an E3 2018 interview. "There [are] a few times where Sora [is] on the edge of despair, but because he's so bright and he has that personality, he quickly brings it back to a neutral state. I think that's a strength he has, and another strength he has is this trust and belief in others. I think that's always been what helped him through the storyline."

Throughout entries, Sora has brushed shoulders with various bad guys like the infamous Maleficent, Organization XIII's Xigbar, and The Masked Boy Vanitas. Ultimately, his biggest adversary is the cunning and manipulative Xehanort, who takes on many incarnations throughout the series. The entire last 20 years have been devoted to this unique personality via the Dark Seeker Saga, where the villain is hellbent on recreating the world to his wishes.

The series revolves around the simple concepts of light and darkness; a balance must be achieved between the two, or chaos will ensue. However, the games are much deeper than what's on the surface, exploring themes of friendship, redemption, loss, and forgiveness. At the recent 20-year celebration in Tokyo, Nomura said that he inserted his own life experiences into the games, like the time he spent living near the ocean as a child, eating ice cream with friends. He also shared some of the guiding themes that shaped the franchise, such as the idea that all our hearts are connected and anybody can be a hero. With its massive popularity, Kingdom Hearts changed Nomura's career. At the anniversary event, he acknowledged how he'd been recognized in these 20 years, noting he wasn't well known when the first game was released. At the same time, the last two decades seem



like a blur. As Nomura recently told *Famitsu*, "Looking back, I can see it's been a long time – but with my sense of time these days, I also feel like not much time has passed at all."

THE DISNEY CONNECTION

Seeing how Square Enix incorporates various Disney elements into the series has been one of its more intriguing aspects. Disney carefully controls how its property is used, and must approve everything. In many interviews, Nomura has said this process is complicated. It's why Mickey, who later became a bigger character, was only in one scene of the first game. It's not surprising that Disney would be extra protective over the face of its worldwide brand, but there was also another reason. Mickey's Magic Mirror was debuting around the same time, and Disney didn't want the character to be prominent in another game.

At the very least, we got plenty of screentime with Donald and Goofy, Sora's main party members. While Donald hasn't always held his own in the healing department, watching the trio's camaraderie grow has been a highlight. Nodding to another Disney film, they really consider themselves The Three Musketeers, shouting, "All for one and one for all!"

However, Kingdom Hearts' main attraction is the childlike wonder of entering Disney worlds and brushing shoulders with iconic characters such as Aladdin, Jack Skellington, and Peter Pan. The series has let us visit fantastical worlds like Beast's Castle, Wonderland, and Olympus Coliseum. Kingdom Hearts III, which became the fastest-selling game in the series' history, marked the introduction of Pixar worlds, adding *Toy Story* and *Monsters Inc.* to its roster. Up until this point, Sora's treks through the Disney landscapes have been very focused on the plot of each movie, a request from Disney. However, Pixar had other ideas. When creative discussions came about, it had a request for Square Enix.

"[Pixar] preferred for us to not follow the film directly," Nomura told us when we interviewed him at the D23 expo in 2017. "They said, 'Please create something original to Kingdom Hearts,' so we did not draw any inspiration from the films. It is completely original and exclusive to Kingdom Hearts, so you can almost say it's a sequel of some sort."

ON KEYBLADE CREATION

Sora's iconic weapon to fight back against the Heartless is the keyblade. Through the years, it's had plenty of striking designs that often match the various Disney worlds. From Tron's neon Dual Disc to a tribute to Cloud Strife with the Fenrir, the series is full of memorable designs. Director Tetsuya Nomura said he works closely with designer Daigo Tsukada to get these just right. Back at E3 2018, he shed more light on the process when we interviewed him.

"I never told [Daigo Tsukada] to do this, but at some point, he started bringing me three concept arts for one keyblade, and I would select from there what I like," he said. "So sometimes I'd be like, 'I like the tip of this keyblade. Can you keep this? Or I like this grip, can you bring this design to here?' There are some keyblades I just like at first glance, and I'm like, 'This is the one.' It seems what he does is [he] takes a lot of different images of the base world. He kind of has a mosaic on his screen, and he just selects and chooses what theme or motif he wants to use. That's the creative process he goes through and I just select from there."

COMPOSER YOKO SHIMOMURA ON CREATING THE ICONIC MUSIC

Kingdom Hearts’ stellar music has continued to be a bright spot in the franchise. Composer Yoko Shimomura has been with the series from the beginning, creating poignant character themes and heart-pumping battle tracks that have become core to Kingdom Hearts’ identity. When we caught up with her at the Kingdom Hearts Orchestra World Tour in 2017, she looked back on her time with the series and shared some insight into the process.

“Kingdom Hearts was the first [title] that I’ve actually worked on that’s a series,” she said. “Up until then, I was never able to handle a full-on series, so it is definitely very memorable in that aspect. In terms of its impact on me as a composer, there are many different Disney worlds inside the game and so many memorable Disney songs. I wanted to make sure I was living up to that expectation, [creating] something that wouldn’t pale in comparison, while also being mindful of the [unique] aspect of Kingdom Hearts and combining it with the world that Disney music already has. Adding the original spin to it gives me the purpose. [It’s] a sense of accomplishment to be able to work on those songs, and they give me new challenges to take on. So it has definitely helped with my own growth. It’s a very inspirational series.”

A memory that sticks with her is from creating “Lazy Afternoons,” a song that first appeared in Chain of Memories and was also brought back in Kingdom Hearts II and 358/2 Days. “I just never got that song to a point where Mr. Nomura would give me the final approval,” she said. “He kept saying there’s not enough melancholy or a longing for – that sort of emotional aspect of it. So I actually stood on my patio and just stared at the sunset and took it in and tried to bring out that nostalgic melancholy kind of feel and finally was able to come up with the song.”

Kingdom Hearts III also tapped into the allure of the Disney theme parks by adding its attractions, such as the Mad Tea Party and Big Thunder Mountain Railroad for Sora to use in battle. At the recent anniversary event, Nomura said since the series has become more well known, he doesn’t have as much freedom as he once did, but his development ideology hasn’t changed.

At the same time, we’re also seeing Disney embrace the series much more than before. *The Wonderful Spring of Mickey Mouse* cartoon recently featured a keyblade in a box Minnie holds, and there’s a keyblade Easter Egg in a trailer for the upcoming *Chip ‘n Dale: Rescue Rangers* film.

THE HEART OF THINGS

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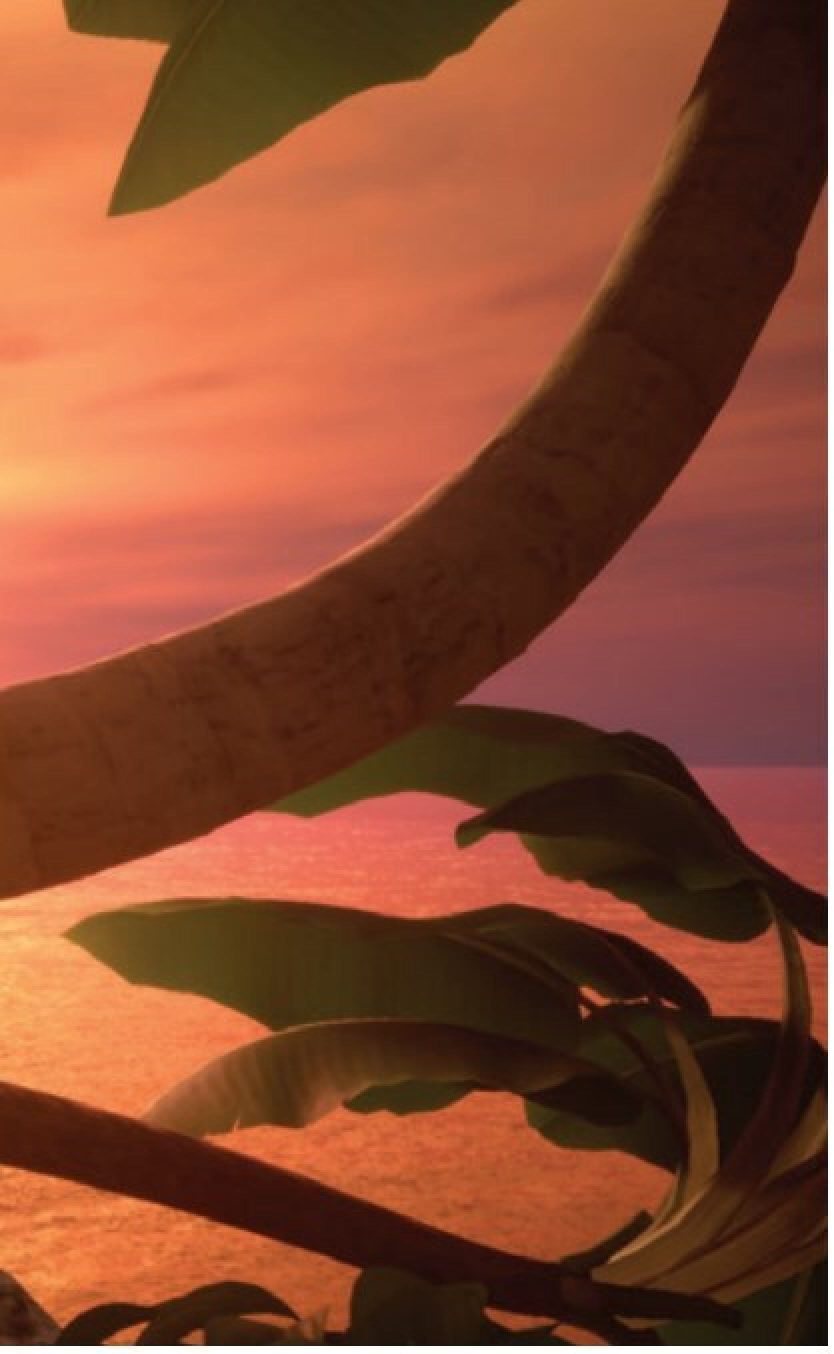
Kingdom Hearts has remained special for fans beyond its Disney ties. In fact, that’s almost become a bonus to the big boss battles (hello, Sephiroth!), intriguing characters [see our Top Five on pg. 19], and intense cliffhangers. Not many people can say they’ve followed an intricate story for 20 years, trying to piece together every little aspect, but part of the appeal is never knowing where things are headed. Nomura has clarified that nothing is off-limits, especially with revelations of time travel, replicas, and other worlds. However, at the heart of the series is something very genuine. It’s about the friendships and the sacrifices we make for the people we love.

The series’ most memorable moments center on three different relationships. We’re first introduced to Sora, Riku, and Kairi, but 358/2 Days’ Axel, Xion, and Roxas and Birth By Sleep’s Terra, Aqua, and Ventus also showcase the complexities of friendships and how we grow from them. These iconic trios served up plenty of emotional and heartwarming moments throughout the series, from Axel, Xion, and Roxas bonding over eating sea-salt ice cream to Terra, Aqua, and Ventus sharing Wayfinder pendants to exemplify their unbreakable connection.

These same powerful friendships make for wonderful storytelling fodder to explore issues of betrayal and sacrifice. It’s heartbreaking to watch Axel and Xion’s bond grow, only to see them duel each other. Seeing Riku fall to darkness and Sora never giving up and fighting for his friend communicates pain and hope in equal measures. Aqua’s decision to trap herself in the realm of darkness to save her friends leads to tragic consequences and leaves players with a haunting and potent memory.

All these friends lose each other somehow, but there’s a moment



at the end of Kingdom Hearts III in the Keyblade Graveyard where everyone has their time to shine. Moments like these encompass what the series has always been about: the power of friendship. For the franchise's biggest fans, it's a powerful and affirming message.

A NEW ERA

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"I've been having these weird thoughts lately ... like is any of this for real or not?" When Sora uttered these words in the first Kingdom Hearts game, no one could have predicted the weight they'd hold in the series' future.

Kingdom Hearts IV was just unveiled [read our preview on pg. 60], and it's apparent change is in the air. Most notably, Sora wakes up in a world that looks very close to ours, with his appearance much more human to match. Kingdom Hears IV is the beginning of The Lost Master Arc, marking a new era for the series.

It's an exciting time for the franchise. Most people who grew up playing it are well into adulthood now. On the other side of the coin, many players have heard of the series and want a fresh point to jump in. Some longtime fans have become dismayed at the loss of Final Fantasy's presence as the entries have gone on, but wonder if this new arc may be an opportunity to incorporate it again somehow.

The time for reinvention isn't lost on Nomura. He even brought on a new writer to help him and longtime Kingdom Hearts writer and cutscene director Masaru Oka with the scenario: Akiko Ishibashi. "The biggest reason is that we wanted to consider how we approach new players with the introduction of a new series from the perspective of someone who is inexperienced with the Kingdom Hearts series," Nomura said in a recent *Famitsu* interview. "She did a great job putting together the characters' motives and plotlines in titles such as Neo: The Worlds Ends With You, so it was also largely because I thought her original ideas would fit well with Kingdom Hearts."

Where it goes from here is anyone's guess, but Kingdom Hearts is not an ordinary series, and that's what keeps us watching its every move. ■

QUICK TAKE

As kids, my siblings and I got Kingdom Hearts and a PS2 with no memory card. Unable to save, we'd get as far as possible every day and lose our progress when we had to turn it off at night. I still look back fondly on those shared memories of triumph and loss, which is a testament to how special Kingdom Hearts is. I've been a fan of the series ever since.

- JILL GRODT

So I ask of you: take this, and find light that's strong enough to accomplish our shared goal.

PLAY THE SERIES IN NOMURA'S PREFERRED ORDER ...

Newcomers often ask about the best way to approach the series now that all the games are out. Birth by Sleep is a prequel, which causes people to wonder if they should start there. Many also ask if they can skip around and still understand the story. Director Tetsuya Nomura has his own preference for how he thinks you should play the series.

"I would recommend going in order of release date, especially because the story hints at things that will happen in future releases," he told us at E3 2018. "I feel it's more interesting that way. Of course, that's not to say you can't play in chronological order."

The Industry's Ebb And Flow

Former PlayStation boss Jack Tretton on acquisitions, cloud gaming, E3, and more

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

JACK TRETTON was the president and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America from 2006 to 2014, but his history with the PlayStation brand stretches back to its very beginnings. He joined Sony in 1995 and worked on the team that created its first home console, the PlayStation. Tretton continued his work with the PlayStation team before becoming SCEA's chief in 2006.

As president, he was the face of PlayStation in marketing, on E3 stages, in interviews, and more. His legacy is PlayStation, but when talking to Tretton, it's clear he loves all video games – not just the ones PlayStation makes – and the industry surrounding them. He's now the CEO of PowerUp Acquisition Corporation, a special purpose acquisition company, but video games are still his bread and butter. *Game Informer* recently spoke with Tretton about the state of the game industry, and he's especially fascinated with the acquisitions happening this year.

On Acquisitions

It started with Take-Two Interactive, the parent company behind the Grand Theft Auto series, announcing back in January it was acquiring mobile giant Zynga for nearly $13 billion. Then, a week later, Microsoft shared it was buying Activision Blizzard, the company behind Overwatch and Call of Duty, for a colossal $68.7 billion. Two weeks after that, Sony revealed it was bringing Bungie under its umbrella for $3.6 billion and followed that up by purchasing former Assassin's Creed and Watch Dogs executive producer Jade Raymond's new company, Haven Studios. As rumors of additional purchases swirl, Tretton says 2022 is "the most amazing year for acquisitions" he's ever seen.

"There's a way to look at virtually everything that happens as being glass half-full or glass half-empty, and you can find ways to come up with negatives about these acquisitions, but I think the positives far outweigh the negatives," says Tretton. "And the positives are that it brings attention to an industry that's already $200 billion and growing, and even though it's more than double the size of the box office and the music industry combined, I still think you find a lot of people out there that don't appreciate how big and sophisticated and ... mainstream entertainment gaming is."

That's why he thinks the industry's true rival lies outside the gaming space. "The competition in the video game industry is not Nintendo versus Sony versus Xbox," Tretton says. "It is video games as an entertainment form against watching TV, going to concerts, whatever other forms of entertainment you have. So the gaming industry is competing for people's time and mindshare, and the more great entertainment experiences there are, the more that people in the video game business and the people that enjoy playing video games have to choose from."

On Live-Service Gaming

PlayStation has a portfolio defined by narrative-driven, single-player experiences. But the company is currently betting big on live service games, something Tretton says he didn't see coming. In February, the company revealed it plans to launch 10 live service games by 2026. That could be risky, as these games need a dedicated audience. But Tretton says the potential success comes down to one thing: is it a valuable entertainment experience? If it is, in his opinion, it will succeed.

"The more that [console] is left on, the more opportunities companies have to make money, and the more people spend time on it and find joy in it, the more value [publishers] get out of the investment they've made," he says. "There's this marriage between the consumer and the manufacturer or the publisher that has to exist, where both parties have to be happy, or it doesn't work out."

On Cloud Gaming

Another game industry shift Tretton didn't foresee is the rise of cloud gaming. He was aware of its potential – Sony's cloud gaming service, PlayStation Now, launched right before Tretton's departure – but he didn't expect it to take hold so fast. Thinking the technology wasn't really there during his final years at Sony, he saw the journey to cloud gaming taking 7 to 10 years. However, he recognizes the exponential growth and believes cloud gaming is a trend to watch.

"The experience is getting better for gamers, the value is getting better, and both [PlayStation and Xbox] have pretty good offerings," Tretton says before noting Nintendo's service is getting better too.

On E3

With news of E3 2022's cancelation – sparking speculation the conference is done for good – the annual expo's been on Tretton's mind a lot lately.

"It was a massively-stressful event to put on, but it was the marquee event for your company for the year," Tretton says. "If you had a good E3 showing, you were going to have a good year. And if you had a bad E3 showing, it was going to be a rough year. It had a lot of pressure on it, but I really enjoyed it."

Tretton says he doesn't think E3 is as valuable and necessary as it has been in the past, but video games still need their own premier event. Some would argue that Geoff Keighley's annual show, The Game Awards, has become that. Still, Tretton says if E3 is done for, "it's a loss for the industry and its ability to ... really celebrate and trumpet all the innovation and great things that it does, so I'd love to see it come back." ■

The competition in the video game industry is not Nintendo versus Sony versus Xbox. It is video games as an entertainment form against watching TV, going to concerts, whatever other forms of entertainment you have.

Tretton's idea of gaming vs other forms of entertainment came to fruition when the leaders of PlayStation, Xbox, and Nintendo stood together at The Game Awards 2018

THE OVERWATCH 2 BETA IS PROOF THAT HEROES NEVER DIE

BY JASON GUISAO

OVERWATCH 2 FEELS LIKE A REDEMPTION ARC. I've been playing the PvP Beta for just under a week now, and the nostalgia factor is palpable. Ability reworks, new arenas, and the controversial player count might still alienate conservative fans, while meager info about the decoupled PvE mode is undeniably worrisome. Nevertheless, I'm confident in the effectiveness of Overwatch's tried and true formula.

The hero changes reveal that individual strategies are as significant as team play. Cassidy, Mei, and Brigitte no longer paralyze foes with flashbangs, frost sprays, or shield bashes. Doomfist has been repurposed as a tank, focusing less on outright eliminations and more on drawing aggression. Orisa gallops across arenas with gusto, impaling enemies with a Javelin and speedily stampeding any weakened targets. The dreaded Bastion is more mobile and a little less deadly now. And Sojourn power slides past frontlines with a Railgun storing devastating energy from her primary fire. The various character modifications smartly create a level playing field where no single team composition determines a match's win or loss condition.

Two fewer players on the map help taper the original game's micromanagement making the 5v5 fights less drawn-out. Engagements snowball quickly, so positioning, mechanical skill, and ability usage remain vital to overtaking the opposition. The design of Overwatch 2's latest maps and mode, Push, also contributes to the split-second gameplay. Rome's "Colosseo" and Toronto's "New Queen Street" contain sprawling alleyways, navigable storefronts, and hidden passages. Flanks are emphasized, and the tug-of-war objective nicely preserves combat momentum from start to finish.

But many of the PvP modes' best adjustments aren't as noticeable. Lo-fi synths blend with the classic, orchestrated fanfare when Overtime triggers. Setting suns coat familiar locales with shimmering auburn splotches, and detailed character portraits hint at a more mature, grounded aesthetic. New York's "Midtown" – a futuristic take on my hometown and my favorite new locale – pulsates with neon billboards and hovercar traffic. And while I couldn't help but feel overcome with the same affection I have for the original game, but it's hard to recommend Overwatch 2 to returning fans yearning for a new direction. In many ways, the sequel is a new-gen facelift with several quality-of-life updates, from a much-needed comms menu complete with pings and other callouts to role-based passives that increase survivability while also mitigating carry potential. The gameplay feels more balanced and eye-popping, and maybe that's enough for the current beta.

No one can predict Overwatch 2's success, but the impressive Twitch viewer count might foreshadow the popularity resurgence the franchise desperately needs. There are enough small-to-medium-scale tweaks in place to encourage excitement. I, for one, will be a launch day player. Still, a robust story mode and more nuanced multiplayer identity will be the real difference-maker. ■

TOP FIVE

MY FRIENDS ARE MY POWER

The Kingdom Hearts characters who brought light to our darkest days

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

1 One of the strongest keyblade wielders, **Aqua** has all the makings of a hero. However, her selflessness in making a huge sacrifice for her friends makes her worthy of respect. Not many people can face the darkness and live to tell the tale. She truly is “a light to cut through all the shadows.”

2 Ever have that friend who’s good at heart, but runs into some dark times? **Riku** goes through a lot in his journey for redemption, highlighting his growth and enduring friendship with Sora. The difficult path allows him to become a dominant force in fighting for his friends and their future.

3 “My summer vacation ... is over.” Who knew this phrase would crush our hearts in more ways than one? **Roxas’** role in Sora’s journey is emotional, and you can’t help but feel endeared to him, especially as he eats sea salt ice cream with his pals. You also have to admire his rebellious streak.

4 Kingdom Hearts turned this adorable and humorous Disney mascot into a fierce fighter crucial to the series’ complex plot. **King Mickey’s** powerful attacks always come at just the right time, but it’s his moving arc with Riku where he really shines, showing a different side to the character.

5 Like Roxas, **Xion** has a poignant role in Sora’s tale, and seeing her embrace it makes for one of the series’ most touching scenes. Xion starts out shy and guarded but watching her open up to Roxas and Axel and accept herself is a bright spot. We’ll also never look at seashells the same again. ■

THE GLORY OF THE HUNT

The villains we hope to see in Marvel's Spider-Man 2

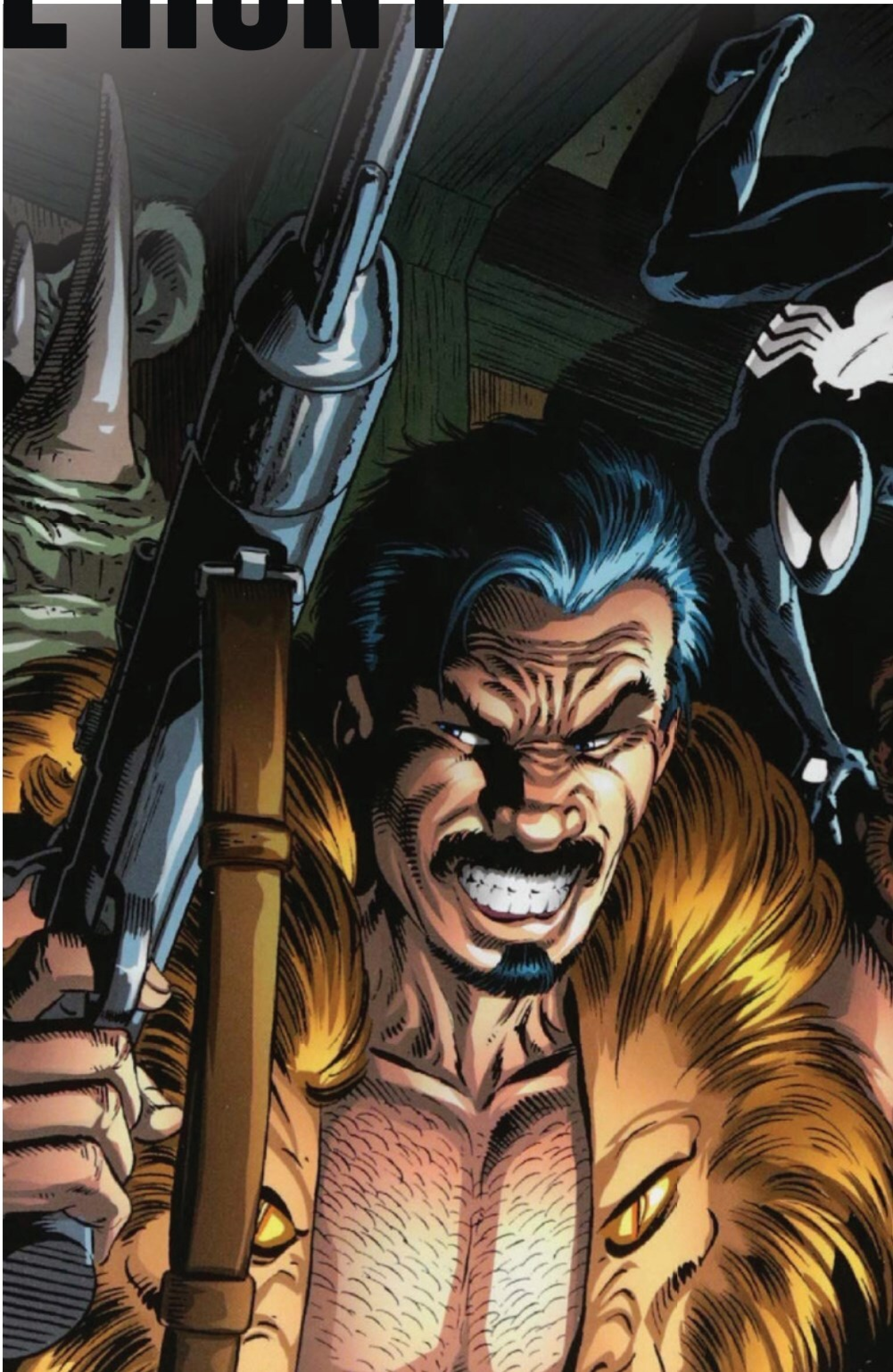
BY ANDREW REINER

OUR SPIDEY SENSE STARTED TINGLING AGAIN in late 2021, when Insomniac Games gave us our first look at Marvel's Spider-Man 2. Slated to release in 2023, this next game appears to be a sequel to both Peter Parker and Miles Morales' standalone games, as we see the Spider-Men fighting side-by-side in a brief teaser trailer.

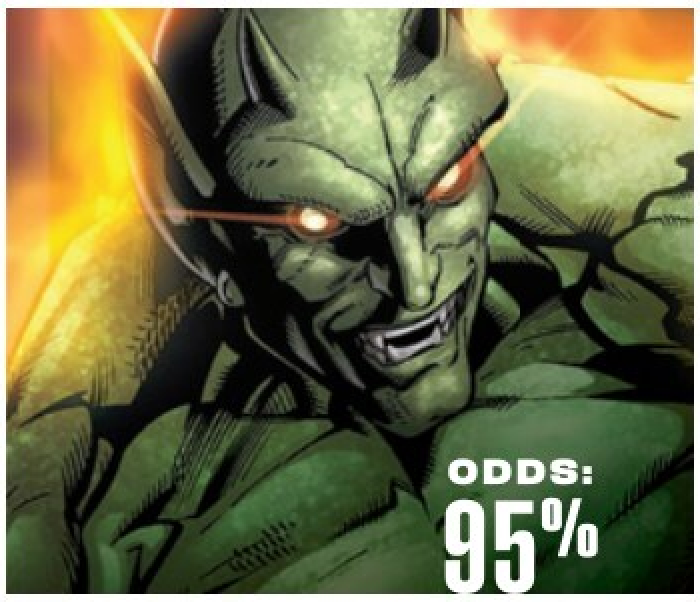
If both characters share the spotlight equally, we could be looking at a wild amalgamation of villains gunning for either one or both. Thanks to a terrifying reveal in the trailer, we know Venom is a part of the mix and will likely be born of the unexpected Harry Osborn developments in both games. The voice we hear in the trailer sounds like it belongs to Kraven the Hunter, but Insomniac won't confirm that suspicion quite yet.

In an episode of the *This Week in Marvel* podcast, Bill Rosemann, the vice president of creative at Marvel Games, said, "If the first Spider-Man game was Star Wars, Spider-Man 2 is kind of our *Empire Strikes Back*. It gets a little darker."

Venom certainly fits the darker billing, and if Kraven is a part of the game, Insomniac may look for inspiration from the popular (and twisted) *Last Hunt* storyline from 1987. With a narrative storm cloud hanging over Peter and Miles' heads, we have a feeling Insomniac will be pulling in foes fitting the darker vibe. Here are five villains (above and beyond Venom and Kraven) that we think will be featured in the upcoming game:

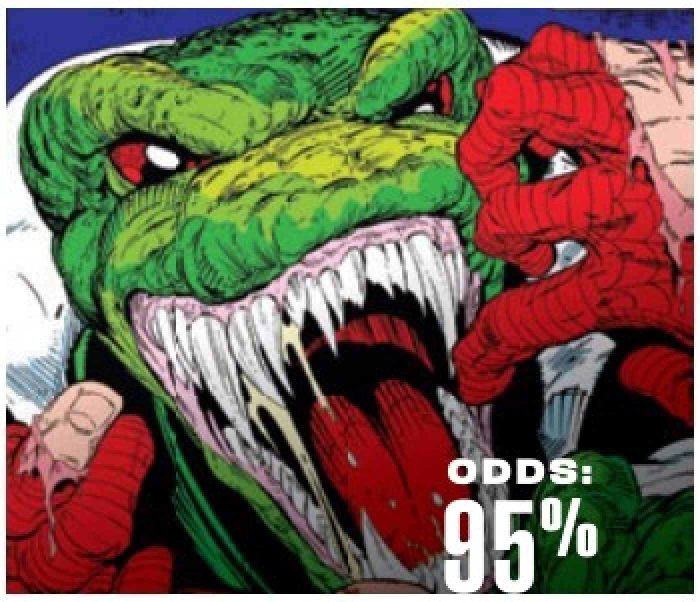


All images © Marvel Comics; title image from the cover of Marvel's *The Amazing Spider-Man* #294



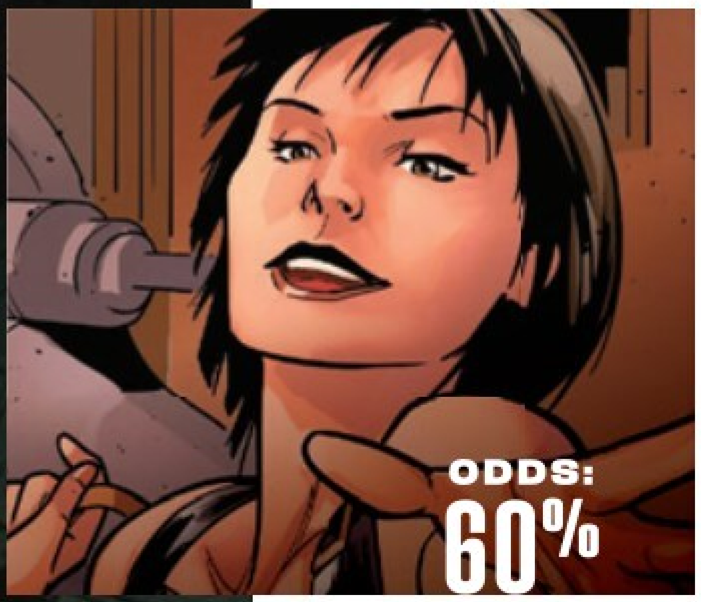
GREEN GOBLIN (BUT NOT THE WAY YOU THINK)

Even with Venom leading the messaging from the trailer, we believe Spider-Man 2 will be telling Green Goblin's origin story. Doctor Octopus wasn't revealed in any of the pre-release marketing for Peter Parker's inaugural game, and the same will likely happen for Green Goblin. If Harry bonds with the symbiote (and potentially becomes Venom), Norman will likely do anything to save him, an endeavor that will likely be his undoing. To fit with the dark theme, this Green Goblin probably wouldn't have a smile on his face and a pointy hat. We believe Insomniac's version could be closer to the demonic version sometimes seen in the comics.



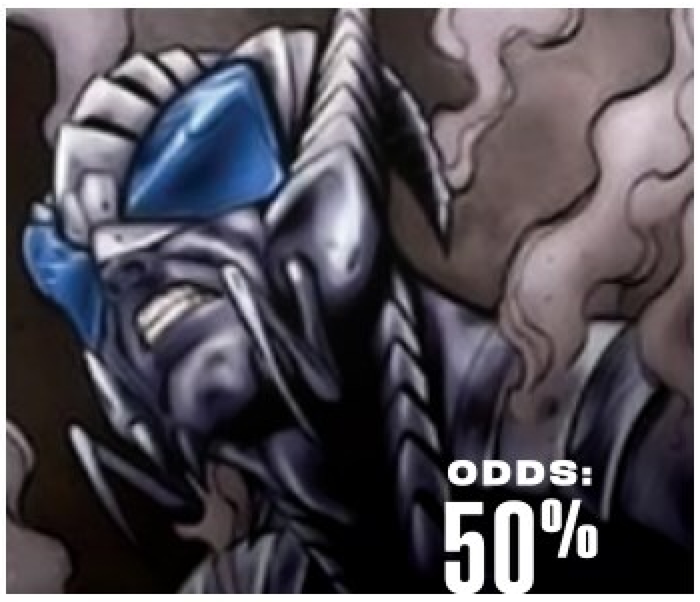
LIZARD

Curt Connors is already a part of Insomniac's Spider-Man universe in a big way. He appears to be Norman Osborn's righthand man in helping find a cure for Harry. Odds are Norman and Curt will both be transformed in a freak accident. The Lizard also fits the bill for Kraven's hunt for worthy adversaries. We see Curt being one of the first villains in the game, with Norman's transformation coming much later.



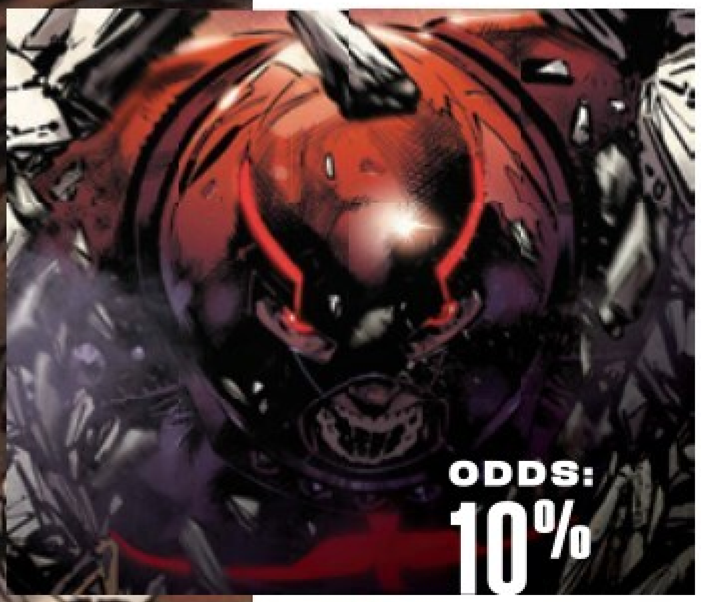
CERES GOLDSTEIN

A creator of high-tech weapons, Ceres has ties to Miles Morales, Black Cat, Hammerhead, Prowler, and a good number of players in Insomniac's Spider universe. Ceres could begin as a villain supplying powerful arms to a faction, but switch to helping Peter and Miles develop technology that could take down Venom and Goblin.



SPENCER SMYTHE & THE SPIDER SLAYERS

Technology is a huge part of both Spider-Man games and likely will be again in this next chapter. If Spider-Man dons the black suit or the player gets the chance to control Venom for a moment, the violence will be amplified, meaning enemies may need to be de-limbed or smashed to bits. Robots are great for that, especially those designed to hunt and kill Spider-Man. Old man Spencer Smythe and his Spider-Slayer army fit that bill perfectly. He could bring in his Goblin-Slayers if Norman is rampaging.



JUGGERNAUT

We have a feeling Insomniac will incorporate at least one mutant with a tie to Wolverine into this game. Wolverine is the studio's next game after Spider-Man 2, and we think Juggernaut could be featured. Why not have him battle the Spider-Men first? We doubt he will be the main villain in Wolverine (we believe Sabretooth lands that honor), and Juggernaut is the perfect stand-in for Rhino, who delivers a larger-than-life encounter. ■

MAKING THE FUTURE OF GAMES

Breaking down Unreal Engine 5 and five anticipated games set to use it **BY JILL GRODT**

TWO YEARS AFTER ITS REVEAL, Epic Games released Unreal Engine 5, hosting a State of Unreal presentation on April 5 to mark the occasion. It wasn't a show geared toward players, appealing more to a game developer audience. As such, fans might have missed some vital information, including a game reveal and the engine's potential. Of course, a new engine means updated technology for making the games we love. A dynamic lighting tool (Lumen), quick character creation app (Metahuman), impressive-looking rendering technology (Nanite), and more, look to take full advantage of new-gen hardware. Epic Games has released all of this for no upfront fee, along with Lyra (pictured above), a ready-made shooter that can be used as a foundation for other games, and "thousands" of free assets – some of which fans saw in last year's The Matrix Awakens demo.

Removing the initial cost barriers could allow more developers to break into the industry. Using the engine isn't entirely free, as the engine's creators ask for a cut after a game's gross revenue tops $1 million, but it is undoubtedly a huge boon for independent creators. However, indie developers aren't the only ones taking an interest. Sony and Lego Group Owner KIRKBI both contributed to Unreal Engine recently – to the tune of a combined $2 billion. Epic Games' partnerships could result in more new-gen-looking games with reduced development time and resource drain, but it will be hard to tell exactly how things shake out until after titles hit shelves. Luckily, a handful of Unreal Engine 5-powered games are on the horizon.

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE 2

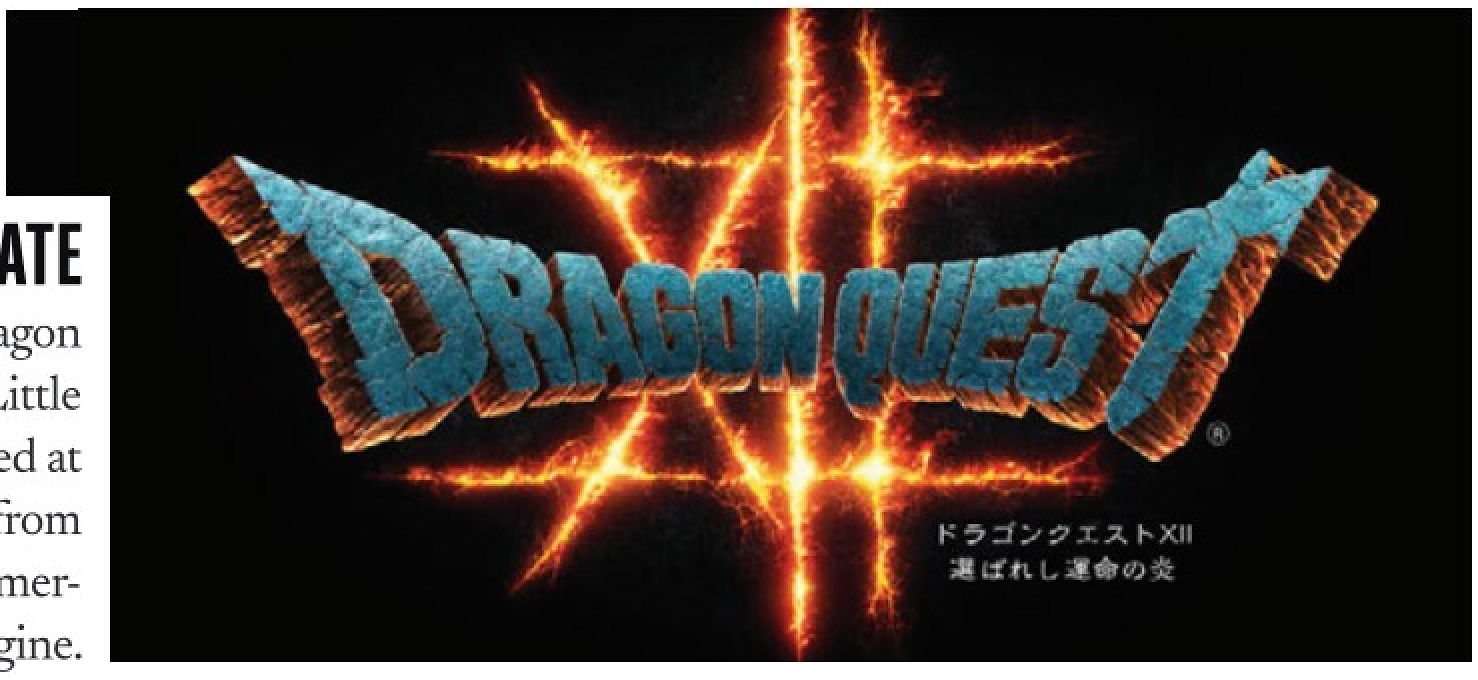
This Xbox console exclusive is one of the first new-gen titles players saw. Though its grand unveiling took place in 2019, alongside the Xbox Series X reveal, we still don't have much information on the anticipated sequel. However, Ninja Theory did give fans a tantalizing peek at its Unreal Engine 5 gameplay at The Game Awards last year.

KINGDOM HEARTS IV

Sora's adventure will continue in Kingdom Hearts IV. While the announcement trailer was created using Unreal Engine 4, the title's creators are reportedly planning to use the next iteration of the engine to build the final game. The series is notorious for long stretches between mainline release dates, so hopefully, the engine's tools will help streamline development, and fans won't have to wait long.

NEW WITCHER GAME

The wind's howling with good news for fans of the Witcher series. CD Projekt Red joined April's State of Unreal presentation to discuss its partnership with Epic Games and its work on the franchise's next game. The studio once again shared the thought-provoking image of the mysterious Lynx Witcher medallion, which may hint at an emerging Witcher school.

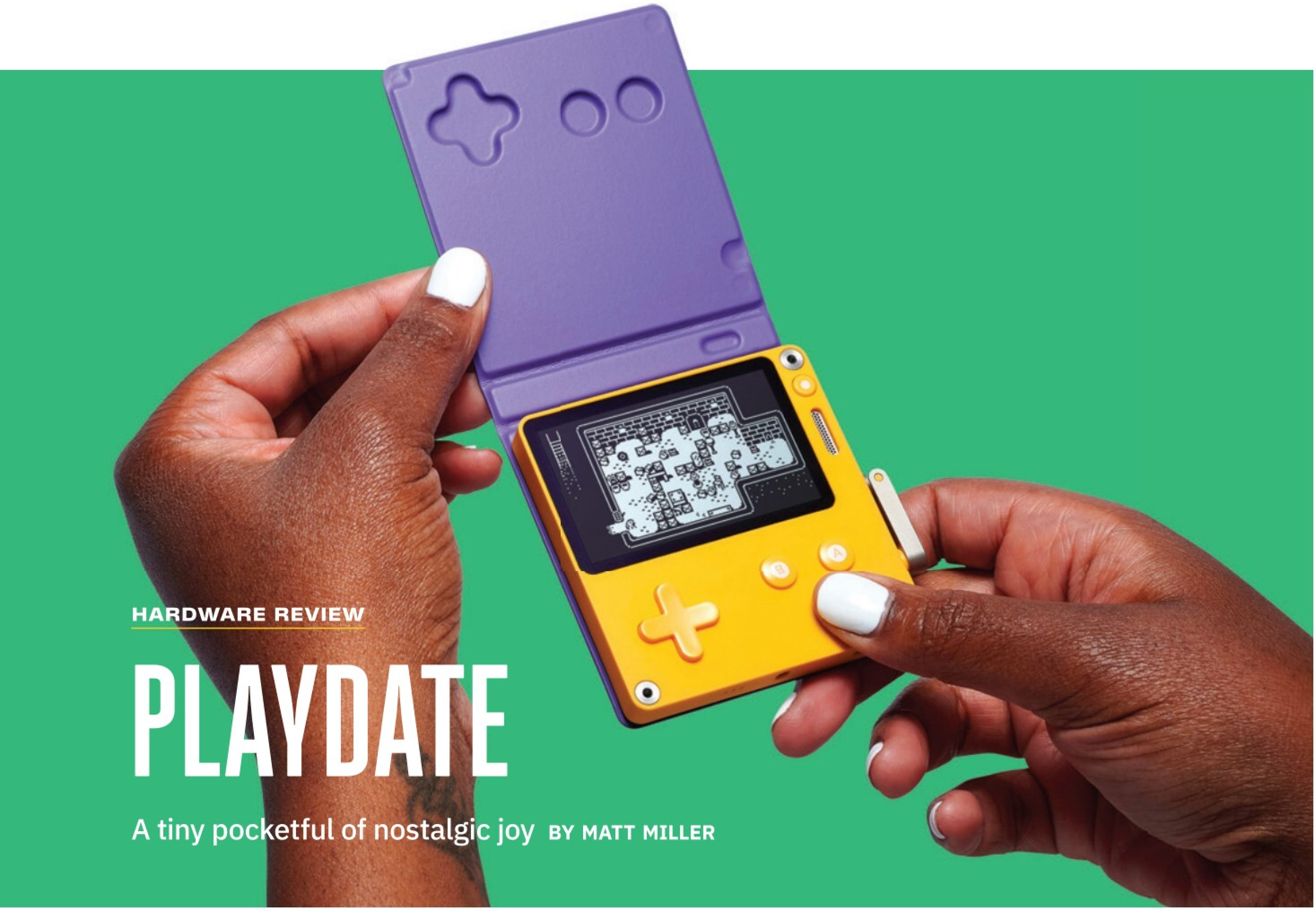

DRAGON QUEST
ドラゴンクエストXII
選ばれし運命の炎

DRAGON QUEST XII: THE FLAMES OF FATE

The first mainline installment in its series since 2017, Dragon Quest XII: The Flames of Fate is looking to shake things up. Little more than a logo screen, the game's fiery, first-look trailer hinted at a dark tone but left a lot to the fans' imaginations. A later post from Dragon Quest's official Twitter account confirmed the grimmer-looking entry uses Epic's latest engine.

NEW TOMB RAIDER GAME

For the "one more thing" of the Unreal showcase, Crystal Dynamic's Dallas Dickinson took the stage to confirm the next Tomb Raider is in development, and the team plans to bring its next journey to life in Unreal Engine 5. The most recent franchise reboot stirred huge interest in Lara Croft's tale. The later games earned increasingly mixed receptions, which has made many fans excited to hear about this fresh start. ■



HARDWARE REVIEW

PLAYDATE

A tiny pocketful of nostalgic joy **BY MATT MILLER**

IN AN ERA OF 4K VISUALS, 3D spatial audio, and sprawling open-world designs, there's something oddly refreshing about a new handheld device trying to emulate the earliest Game Boy and Game & Watch experiences. Playdate is a retro-inspired indie handheld built entirely to deliver novel experiences in a pocket-friendly format. From its bright and friendly appearance to its often whimsical games, it's clear the Playdate's name was chosen with purpose. Like a meet-up between childhood friends, this is an experience meant to recall youth and simplicity and delight those who pick it up through an array of small, entertaining activities.

The Playdate makes an excellent first impression. The charming yellow handheld may be tiny, but feels solid in hand. The buttons are clicky and responsive, and the side crank (the system's most significant innovation) is satisfying to twist round and round. The included speakers are crisp, clear, and capable of robust volume for their size. Or you can plug your preferred headset into the included jack. The small reflective black and white screen nails the nostalgic vibe it's going for, instantly calling to mind those first successful handheld games that older players may remember from youth.

However, the small screen and absence of backlighting are also Playdate's biggest failures. While it might offer a throwback experience, I don't think I've ever found myself missing those heady days of eye strain from trying to read minuscule text or constantly tilting my device to catch the best light. The Playdate must contend with both problems. In bright outdoor sunlight, the Playdate is at its best. But in indoor settings or later in the day outside, a nearby direct light source is nearly essential. Even with excellent vision, I needed regular breaks from play to prevent significant eye strain.

The user interface is straightforward when it needs to be in menus and setup scenarios but playful when it can be. A seemingly eager-to-please robotic buddy handles an intro and the subsequent navigation to individual games. Its eyes gleefully open as you double-tap the button to wake the machine up. As new games arrive in your library, they show up as wrapped presents, and the robot pulls open the ribbon to reveal the new arrival.

The games in question are delivered via download on a WiFi connection, and the initial launch includes full access to all 24 games in the first season. This naming convention certainly implies future expansion. But even ahead of the implied later seasons, the device is especially creator-friendly. It fully supports the sideloading of new games through an easy-to-manage process; the review package included the option to sideload an enjoyable game called Bloom, about running a flower shop. While I didn't have the expertise to build anything worthwhile myself, the Playdate's SDK is free to download, so enterprising programmers should have few barriers to creating something unique.

Playdate's developer, Panic Inc., has brought aboard an eclectic group of indie game creators for its initial catalog. The mostly bite-sized projects represent an impressively curated mix of genres and game styles. Many of these games use the analog crank as an input method, whether for something simple like advancing text or an actual navigation tool for movement and action. I like the novelty, but I'm not yet sold on the crank as far as its utility for precise controls.

By their nature, the included games arrive in small batches in the days after your Playdate purchase arrives, a clear expression that this device is meant to be experienced as a gradual unearthing of fun. It would be a shame to spoil too much about the individual experiences. Every player is likely to be attracted to different games. The most rewarding were games that embraced simplicity and throwback designs, albeit with some clever modern twists.

Spellcorked has players stirring up reagents to make magic potions with a crank twist. Battleship Godius is a variation on 2D space shooters, but with a crank to rewind time when things go wrong. Executive Golf DX has you shooting a golf ball up the proverbial corporate ladder, with desks and copy machines as obstacles. Not every game clicked for me, but that's sort of the point; each of these small concept games is an experiment likely only to capture the attention of certain players. But the joy of discovering these unknown projects is easily half the fun. If you come out with several favorites on the other side, all the better. ■

GRADE: B-

The charm and nostalgia of the black and white screen wear off, and poor lighting can ruin the fun. Strong battery life (rechargeable via USB-C plug-in), sturdy construction, and a good opening slate of games are reasons to jump on the Playdate bandwagon. Even if not all the initial games are winners, they're all surprising and will make you smile.

$179 | Released April 18 | *play.date*

Favorite Finds

If you're considering a purchase, Playdate's early library of games is best experienced while knowing as little as possible. Everyone is likely to find their favorites, but if you're okay with some light spoilers, here are some of my picks from the first season's 24-game collection.

Snak

DEVELOPER: ZACH GAGE

One of Playdate's most straightforward and approachable games is also one of its most enjoyable. Snak is a relatively direct emulation of the classic Snake, in which you guide an ever-lengthening serpent as it snatches up apples. But this time, the apples can move across the screen, they infect and slowly climb toward your head, and you can jump over your own scaly body to eat the apples before they end the game. The tweaks to the formula add a new layer of strategy, and the escalating speed levels always provide a new challenge to chase.

Sasquatchers

DEVELOPER: CHUCK JORDAN

Cornering the "turn-based tactical cryptozoology" genre, this amusing mash-up challenges players to lead a team of fame-obsessed scientists with dreams of becoming influencers as they venture into the wilderness to snap pictures of cryptids like the Sasquatch and Chupacabra. The grid-based movement recalls games like Advance Wars, while the framing of good photos (to capture views and likes) seems inspired by the likes of Pokémon Snap. It's a silly and engaging mix that kept me playing for a long time.

Inventory Hero

DEVELOPER: PANIC

This battle-focused RPG has your intrepid hero running ever-forward into more dangerous environments and monsters, but his attacks are on auto. Players must juggle a rapidly expanding inventory as it threatens to overwhelm the few open spots in their backpacks. Pick the best armor and weapons, pop healing potions, and make sure to trash those pesky rabbits before they start to breed and take up extra space. It's fun, fast, and diverting.

Pick Pack Pup

DEVELOPER: NIC MAGNIER, ARTHUR HAMER

You're a well-meaning dog hired at a massive profit-obsessed shipping fulfillment center, which is certainly not based on any real-world analog. The match-three gameplay demands you put specific shipments together on each work day. The constantly shifting objectives keep things fresh. Matches/packages only disappear when you send them for shipment, so there's a clever risk/reward mechanic to maximize your score.

Forrest Byrnes: Up In Smoke

DEVELOPER: NELS ANDERSON, CHRISTINA NEOFOTISTOU

Forrest is a cheerful forest ranger running ahead of a raging inferno, rescuing children and picking up collectibles through a gamut of short 2D platforming stages. Designed to be enjoyed in short doses of traversal fun, each new level injects random new elements to uncover and pick up. The action is familiar and uncomplicated, but the clever level design and tight controls ensure a good time.

Crankin's Time Travel Adventure

DEVELOPER: UVULA

Crankin is a robot who enjoys napping, but he's always late for his dates with Crankette. Through a series of increasingly complex meet-ups, you must wind the crank to make Crankin rush toward his meet-up with his girlfriend. Pause or "rewind" the crank, and he halts or reverses his run, even while other objects continue moving. A seemingly endless series of distractions halt your progress, from bumping into a butterfly to the chance for a nice cup of tea. You must navigate the hapless robot into the exact position he needs to be in to let the obstacles pass him by before continuing along his frenzied way, and his doomed date with an impatient partner.

INTERVIEW

Switching Things Up

We caught up with the iconic former president and COO of Nintendo of America to chat about his favorite memories of his time at Nintendo **BY BRIAN SHEA**

IN 2019, REGGIE FILS-AIMÉ STEPPED AWAY from his role as president and chief operating officer of Nintendo of America, a position he had held since 2006. But his time with and love of Nintendo stretches further back than his tenure as president. Fils-Aimé joined Nintendo in 2003 as the executive vice president of sales and marketing, and long before that, he obsessed over games like Super Mario World and The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past.

At E3 2004, he introduced himself to the world by saying, "My name is Reggie. I'm about kicking ass. I'm about taking names. And we're about making games." With those famous words, Fils-Aimé was catapulted into internet fame, becoming the subject of memes seemingly every time he appeared on stage. But to write him off solely as a meme machine would be to discount his strong record as a marketer and leader within the ranks of Nintendo of America.

While promoting his new book, *Disrupting the Game: From the Bronx to the Top of Nintendo*, Fils-Aimé appeared on *Game Informer*'s *All Things Nintendo* podcast to chat about his career. Here's an abridged version of our discussion.

Reggie Fils-Aimé

Former president and COO of Nintendo of America, and video game industry icon. His memoir, *Disrupting the Game*, released in May 2022

Can you think back to the first Nintendo game you ever played?

My truly first Nintendo game experience was probably me dropping quarters for Donkey Kong, like so many during that time. But my first true console experience with Nintendo was the Super Nintendo Entertainment System and Super Mario World that came with the system. And I was enthralled by that game. I played it to full completion, completed it with 99 lives. It wasn't the game that necessarily hooked me in, but certainly an introduction to all things Nintendo through Super Mario World was pretty special.

That leads me into asking what is your favorite Nintendo game of all time?
Up until five years ago, my favorite game of all time was The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past. And this truly was the first Nintendo game that completely sucked me in that I played for hours and hours and hours. You know, solving the puzzles, battling as Link. I was at a point where I actually called the Nintendo Power Hotline and tried to get a hint for solving one of the dungeons. And this game completely consumed me. I was working at Pizza Hut at the time as a marketing director for geographically about a third of the country, and I would play Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past until the wee hours of the morning, then go off to work. It truly became a second job for me. But, as I said, five years ago, it changed, and now my favorite Nintendo game is Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild. I actually have to look at my Switch and see how many hours I've put into that game, but I love that game. I'll put it down and then come back to it three months later, dust off the rust of my skills, get back out there. It's a pretty fantastic experience for me.

Has the internet ever caught you off-guard with their reactions or memefication of you?
I wouldn't say that it's caught me off-guard. I have to say I've always been surprised, a bit amused by the reaction that I have on the internet, all the memes. Because I began in this industry as a player, playing all of those very, very original video game systems, all of my early experiences with Nintendo systems, Sony systems, Microsoft systems, I believe I still have a player's sensibility and a player's love for franchises. I always found it a surprise how the fans reacted – and reacted in such a positive way. And now, in retirement, I'm able to have fun with it. I troll fans back on Mother 3 and that whole experience, and I'm fortunate enough to have that type of relationship, even today, with the broad gaming community.

In your book, you describe a very memorable first interaction with the legendary Shigeru Miyamoto. Seeing as how you came into the industry as a fan, were you excited or nervous to meet him for the first time?
As I described in the book, I was a bit shocked. I made a trip to Japan, to Nintendo's headquarters in Kyoto, within the first six weeks that I was on the board as an executive. That trip was to see all of the early content that we would be leveraging at E3 2004. We're locked in a conference room with an exposed prototype of the Nintendo DS; this is two screens on a motherboard with chipsets and soldering that is running. I made the comment that we needed to really leverage the uniqueness of the touchscreen. As I'm making these comments, I see out of the corner of my eye that someone has knocked on the door to the closed conference room, someone is going to see who it is, then they let the newcomer into the room. All of this is happening out of the corner of my eye, I really can't see who it is. Everyone turns and looks to the newcomer. The newcomer is Shigeru Miyamoto, who then starts saying how these comments are absolutely right, we need to highlight the innovation of the touchscreen. And he finishes this statement by saying, "And who are you?" pointing at me, because we'd never met before. As he's making these comments and I turned to him, I recognize it's Mr. Miyamoto, my knees begin to shake a little bit. It was pretty nerve wracking, I must say.

Your book begins with an emotional gut punch as you recall your final meetings with Satoru Iwata. When you think about his legacy, is it even possible to properly frame what he meant to Nintendo?
I actually have to step further back and think about what he meant for the industry. There is no one who has been involved in some of the top-selling systems, the top-selling games and franchises the way he has. Everything from his involvement in the early NES and SNES content ... Game Boy, he made an indelible mark on Game Boy content, his involvement, even on the periphery of key franchises like Pokémon, his being there at the inception of franchises like Kirby and Smash Bros. Obviously, his personal mark on the Nintendo DS, the Nintendo 3DS, the Wii; even the Switch carries his hallmark. He touched Nintendo certainly in an incredible way, but what he did for the industry and helping move the industry forward is something that has to be acknowledged. ■

This conversation and some of the quotes have been abridged from the full conversation that appeared on episode 31 of Game Informer*'s* All Things Nintendo *podcast. Reggie Fils-Aimé's book,* Disrupting the Game: From the Bronx to the Top of Nintendo*, is available now*

↓
Shigeru Miyamoto and the late Satoru Iwata, with Reggie

NO STOPPING ANY TIME

ALL AGES

GROWING UP GAMING

How much game time should children get in a day? **BY ANDREW REINER**

LIMITING PLAY TIME is something I struggle with almost every day. My daughter spends far too much time with her games, and I sometimes feel like I'm failing her as a father by not pushing her to do other things. Gaming is her favorite hobby in the world, and nothing else comes close to it. She takes after me in that regard. While I love seeing our interests overlap, I have to be better about the time we dedicate to gaming. I need to read with her more and embrace her love of drawing. I will work on these things and try to intersperse them into our daily routines, but the allure of gaming is hard to deny, and a youngster's emotions can lead to outcomes you wouldn't expect.

Part of the problem is the pandemic turned us into homebodies. As of this writing, most of our out-of-home adventuring and socializing remain on hold. That's not to say we don't talk to people; most of my daughter's gaming time is social. As she plays on console or PC, she Facetimes with her friends on iPad. Seeing these energetic youths "hang out" is fantastic, but their time together can't be all video games. Down the road, I hope to incorporate arts and other activities into their distance socializing, which requires coordination with the other girls' parents – something I'm confident they will embrace.

For those of you who have children that don't want to put the controllers down or are wondering just how much game time they should get, I have some ideas that may work for you. Right out of the gate, I should tell you that there's nothing scientific about my approach, and I haven't consulted doctors or scientists to learn about the health risks or benefits of gaming at certain ages. My advice is simply as a dad who loves his daughter and is always looking to enrich her life in ways that make her light up and smile.

HARD TIME LIMITS

We know how long movies and TV shows are when we boot them up for our kids to watch. Video games are all over the map when it comes to time commitments. Depending on what game your child selects, saying they can play for just one hour can lead to wildly different results when the timer reaches zero. You may catch them at the perfect moment to conclude for the night, but most of the time, you'll stop their playing when they are trying to accomplish something. Don't be surprised if your child's first instinct is to ask for more time. They either want to see their journey through to the end or finish something they're working on. If a game's functionality doesn't record every second your child puts in, they could grow irritated knowing their efforts were for naught.

Your response in this moment is important: hinging on them running off to bed satisfied or melting down in a full-blown tantrum. You owe it to your child to understand what they are playing, why it is important to them, and when to turn it off without fear of losing something. Do your research. Sit and play that game with them the first couple of times to truly learn how it ticks.

↘ Clockwise from opposite: Minecraft, Roblox, Toca Life World

Your takeaways will help shape what kind of time commitment they get with a game. A hard one-hour gaming session doesn't make much sense for a title like LEGO Star Wars. You can better tell your child that they can play through three levels (each lasting approximately 20 minutes). They know what they get to do and when to turn it off. However, you have to be attentive and make sure they aren't milking the clock by aimlessly wandering around the levels. At that point, you can tell them they have to stay on the mission path, or it'll be two levels instead of three.

Creative games like Minecraft, which have no ending points, are better suited for hard time limits. An hour is a good amount for that game, but keep an eye on their creations. If they are constructing something fantastic and you think they can finish it within a reasonable amount of time, I suggest letting them play longer. Encourage them and let them know they are doing a great job. Minecraft is a beautiful creative tool that helps them learn about architecture and design.

Additional game time is a perfect reward for completing homework, reading books, cleaning up the bedroom, doing chores, and more. If you go in this direction, I recommend putting tasks and the rewards on a dry erase board in their bedroom. It's a goal they can get excited about and strive to achieve.

I wish I had a system like this in place for my daughter. We did before the pandemic hit – when we spent less time in our house – but games are now our routine after she comes home from school and I finish work. We unwind with them, and I'm guilty of gaming with her for far too long.

On a school night, I try to keep her gaming to two to three hours, which is doable given there isn't that much time left in the day. Weekends are where I struggle. I want to keep her at that three-hour mark, but it's more like six, seven, or even twelve. Part of my struggle comes from my upbringing. I gamed from sunrise to sunset on summer breaks and have no regrets. I lucked out and can say that those long gaming days provided schooling for my career. That's not a realistic scenario for most people. Again, I need to find other things to stimulate my daughter that don't involve a screen.

I think and stress about it too much, but I know I will find something eventually. Parenting isn't easy, especially when video games are better than ever. I adore that my daughter has turned them into a social experience, but I don't want her staring at a screen all day long. It's a struggle. ■

I'd love to hear from you about your child's gaming and the routines you have in place. You can write me at Reiner@GameInformer.com. I may include some of your responses in my column in the months ahead. Be well, and enjoy gaming with the little ones!

evi
leah
made by leah

1
For the audiophile

THE GAMER'S GRADUATION GIFT GUIDE

It's been a rough couple of years of schooling for anyone forced to persevere through recent challenges. If you have a gamer in your life who has reached the finish line, we have some suggestions for gifts that can make them smile after they walk the stage and pick up their diploma. **BY MATT MILLER**

① JBL QUANTUM ONE

JBL's premier wired gaming headset is no slouch, offering an exceptionally robust selection of features well suited to the newest generation of hardware. The spatial audio effect is enhanced since you can drown out surrounding audio clutter with active noise canceling, and made incredibly immersive thanks to a snazzy head-tracking feature. Music and sound effects alike are punchy and accurate across the full spectrum of highs, mids, and lows, with an uncommonly satisfying bass. The included removable boom mic sends voice through loud and clear. In short, it's a pricey entry into the competitive gaming headset market, but one that shouldn't disappoint. Compatible with almost anything via 3.5 mm audio jack, but most valuable when paired to a PC for full feature inclusion.

$299 | *jbl.com*

② THE MYSTERY OF HUNTER'S LODGE

Some of the best gifts are experiences, so why not reward your new grad with an immersive night of puzzle-solving and unsolved questions? Mystery night games have been around for a while. But this Agatha Christie classic has been adapted with an eye toward an especially intriguing adventure. From a locked chest to a wristwatch, extremely high-quality props elevate the experience above the standard fare. If a mix of role-playing, party game silliness, and mystery-solving sound like a good fit, this is a murder worth solving.

$189 (Collector's Edition),
$99 (Retail) | *store.huntakiller.com*

For the
mystery buff

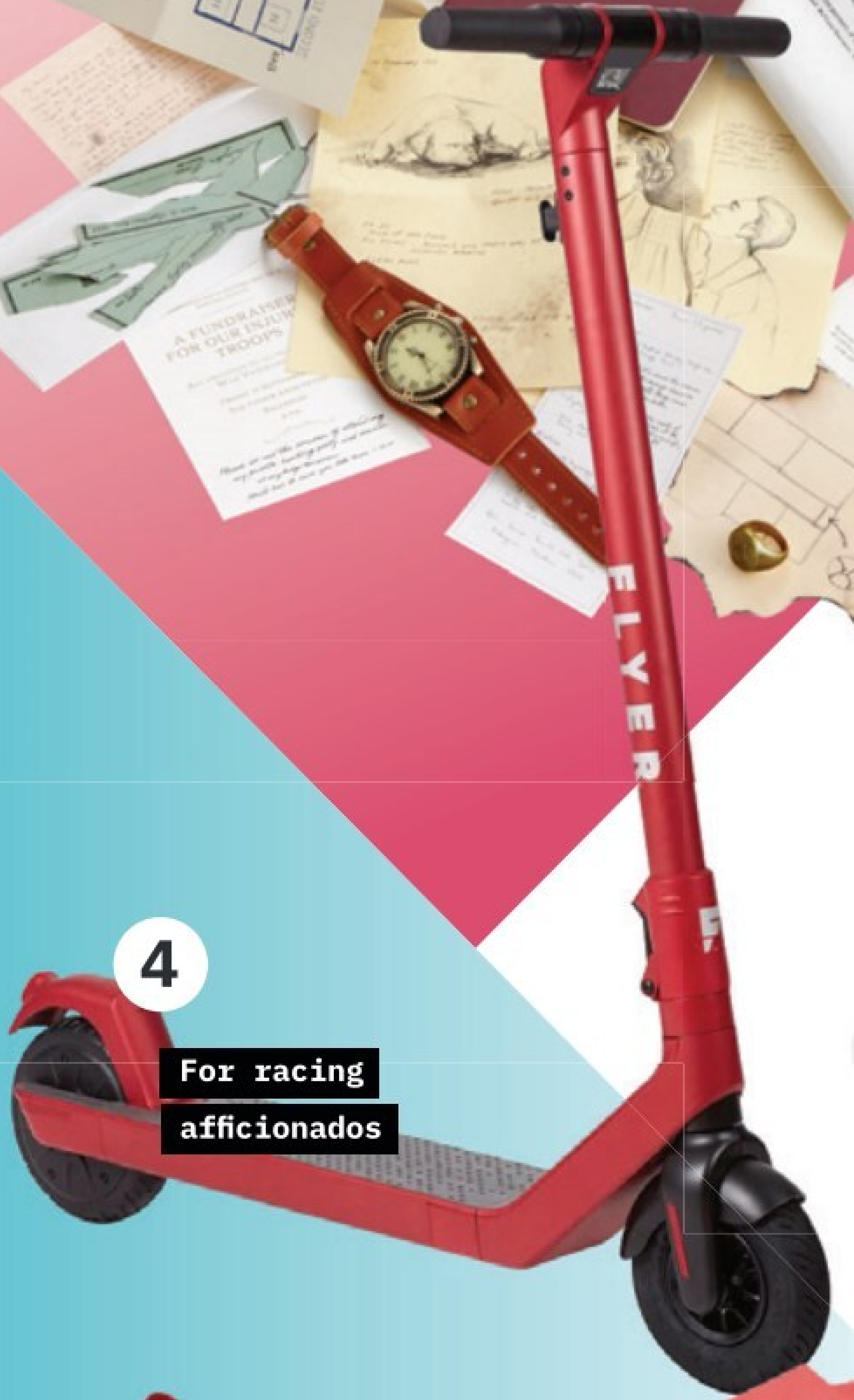
2

3

For the
Fantasy enthusiast

4

For racing
aficionados



5

For the
D&D player

6

For the
high flyer

Disclaimer: Recommended products are selected by our editorial team, independent of our parent company, GameStop

❸ GANDALF ACTION FIGURE

You shall not pass up this detailed likeness of the seminal wizard as he appeared in the celebrated film franchise. Gandalf the Grey may have enjoyed a relaxing pipe in his free time, but when threats arise, his included staff and sword, Glamdring, are more than adequate to defend the Fellowship. The 7-inch scale figure has 16 points of articulation to nail that perfect pose.

$29.99 | *diamondselecttoys.com*

❹ RADIO FLYER S533

Best known for the company's iconic childhood wagons, Radio Flyer has made some significant strides into the adult market in recent years, including this slick e-scooter. Capable of hitting up to 16 mph, the compact scooter is a perfect gift, whether your grad is headed off to another sprawling college campus or moving into their first place in the big city. The rechargeable battery has enough life to take a rider over 15 miles on a charge, and wherever they stop, the whole thing can fold up for easy carrying. It comes in three colors; white or black is fine, but why wouldn't you go for red?

$599 | *radioflyer.com*

❺ GELATINOUS CUBE STATUE

You've got a role-playing gamer in your life, but you're not in on the fun, so it might be a mystery why a transparent ooze is an exceedingly clever gift. This iconic monster hunts its prey through dungeon tunnels, snatching up everything in its path, and has been part of the Dungeons & Dragons game since its original 1974 incarnation. We can write the graduation gift card for you, and you can thank us later: "A reminder of your own insatiable hunger for knowledge!" You're welcome.

$59.99 | *gamestop.com*

❻ POWER UP 4.0 PAPER AIRPLANE

If the gamer in your life enjoys flight games, Power Up's clever twist on the classic paper airplane should be a hit. This smartphone-controlled flyer can connect to almost anything you can fold up around its frame.
It offers around 10 minutes of flight time, in-app controls for loops and barrel rolls, and an onboard computer that reacts to unexpected changes like shifts in wind direction. For a slightly higher cost, you can try out versions that use balsa wood or foam or select a bundle that includes all three materials so that you can find your preferred design.

$69.99 | *poweruptoys.com*

1
GAME ON
ATARI

For the sneaker head

❶ CARIUMA X ATARI SNEAKERS

Cariuma prides itself on a sustainable and responsible approach to shoes without sacrificing quality or wearability. Those traits are apparent in their new collaboration with Atari, which adds a little retro gaming flair to the team's already excellent OCA design. The shoe leverages organic cotton and cork/mamona oil insoles for an extra comfy fit. Meanwhile, the various Atari-themed logos and designs recall those earliest days of home gaming.

$89 | *cariuma.com*

For new-school and old-school Star Wars fans alike

❷ BOBA FETT EDITION XBOX CONTROLLER & STAND

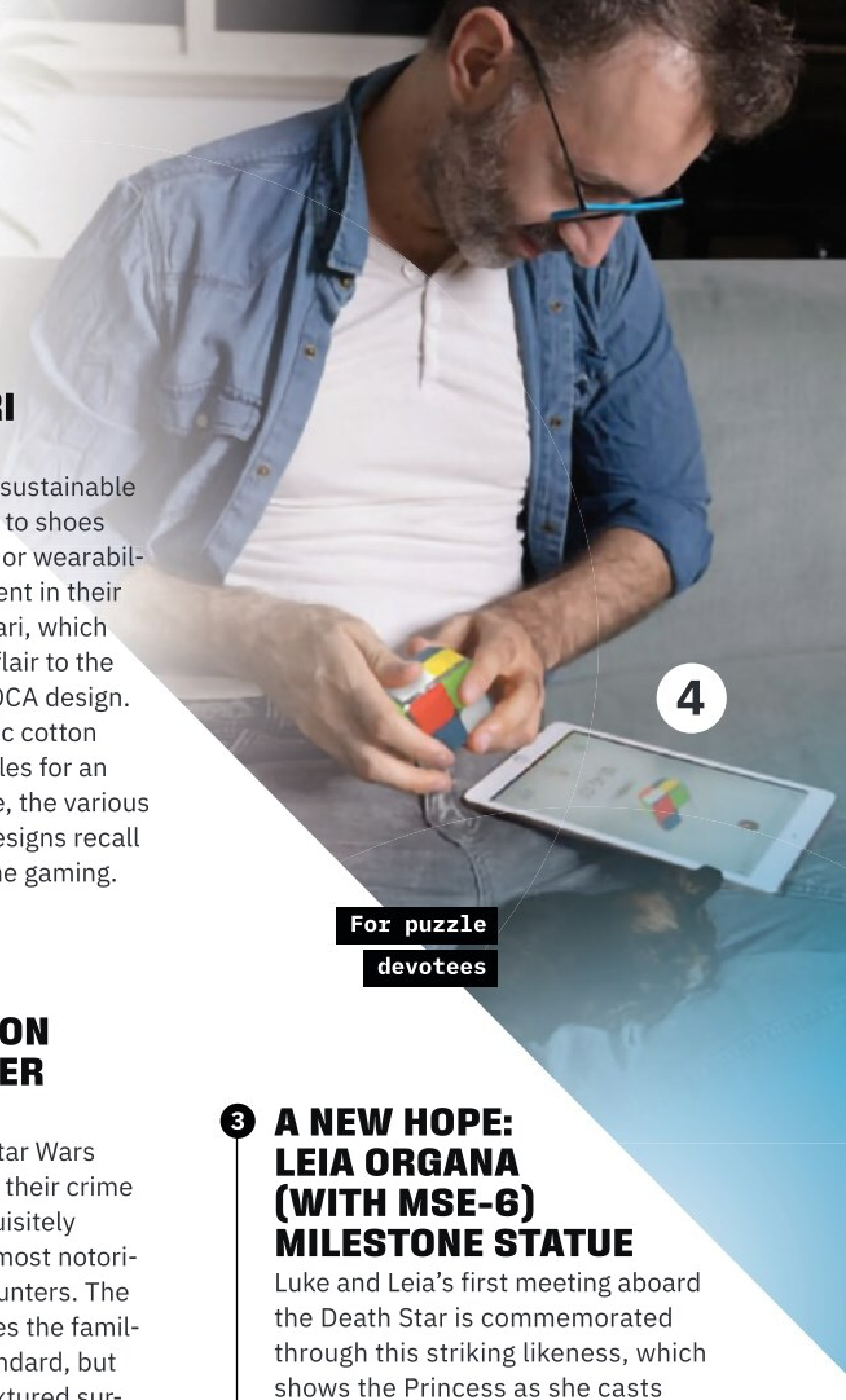
Followers of the newest Star Wars adventures can settle into their crime lord thrones with this exquisitely designed homage to that most notorious of Star Wars bounty hunters. The wireless controller matches the familiar functionality of the standard, but careful detail work and textured surfaces add a premium feel. It's a steep asking price for a standard controller and stand, even with the included rechargeable battery. But as a gift for a Star Wars devotee, the incredibly high cool factor of how this displays, especially as it sits on the shelf charging, makes it swoon-worthy.

$179 | *razer.com*

❸ A NEW HOPE: LEIA ORGANA (WITH MSE-6) MILESTONE STATUE

Luke and Leia's first meeting aboard the Death Star is commemorated through this striking likeness, which shows the Princess as she casts a wary eye on her rescuer. The sculpting is top-notch, with detailed paintwork that brings out the classic character as she appeared in the 1977 film. The included mouse droid is a lovely bonus. It may be a little short for a stormtrooper at roughly 10 inches in height and 1/6 scale, but she's perfect for your grad's shelf.

$200 | *gentlegiantltd.com*



For puzzle devotees

❹ GOCUBE 2X2

If the secrets of cubing have always been elusive, the 2x2 GoCube is an awesome way to explore the hobby, especially for beginners. The cube has light-up options, smooth turning mechanics, and pleasing curved corners. But it's the digital connection to its free app that really layers in fun, as it can track the cube's rotations in real-time, gradually teaching its secrets through tutorials, games, and stats. If Rubik has ever daunted someone, this guaranteed path to a solution is incredibly satisfying.

$49.99 | *getgocube.com*

FOR GAMER GRADS

Meta Quest 2 – 128GB

Meta Quest 2 is our most advanced all-in-one VR system yet. Get the most out of each moment with blazing-fast performance and next-generation graphics. Stay focused with a stunning display that features 50% more pixels than the original Quest. Or take a break from the action and grab front-row seats to live concerts, exclusive events, and more! No PC or console required. **$299**

FOR TECH-SAVVY GRADS

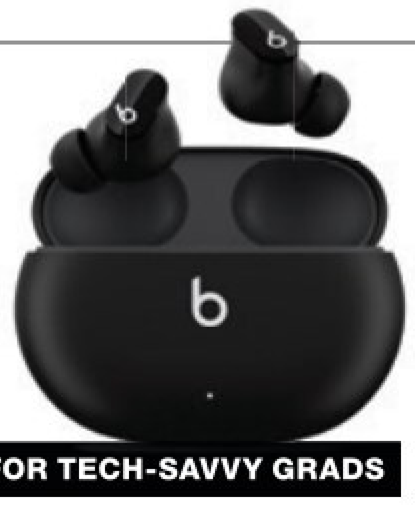
DJI FPV Drone with FPV Goggles V2 and FPV Remote Controller 2

Fully immerse yourself in the amazing aerial views and unbridled speed of drone flying with the combo version of the DJI FPV Drone. Using the bundled FPV Goggles V2, you get a first-person view of what the drone sees, with footage that makes it feel like you're the one flying through the sky. The onboard 4K 60fps gimbal camera can send low-latency video to your goggles for a near real-time experience. The 150-degree super-wide FOV lets you take in and appreciate the scope of the vistas you fly over. **$999**

DORM ROOM

Halo Light-Up Energy Sword LED Desk Light

Based on the traditional Sangheili melee weapon from the Halo franchise, this LED desk lamp is powered by USB, which means it looks sharp plugged into your gaming rig or your office computer. When lit, it puts off the distinctive glow of the formidable weapon, ready to inspire, intimidate, and impress Halo fans. **$59.99**



FOR TECH-SAVVY GRADS

Beats Studio Buds Wireless Noise Cancelling Earphones

Driven by premium sound and designed with a custom acoustic platform, Beats Studio Buds are engineered to deliver powerful and balanced sound in a compact, in-ear form factor. **$119**

MANDALORIAN

DORM ROOM

Mandalorian Single Cup Coffee Maker with Mug

This GameStop Exclusive goes where no coffeemaker has gone before, brewing hotter, faster and better-tasting coffee than most machines out there; brews an 8 oz. cup in less than 90 seconds. **$22.49**

DORM ROOM

Samsung The Freestyle 550-Lumen Full HD Smart Projector

Kick back and enjoy the content you love, when and where you want to. Full 1080p HD. **$899**

FOR TECH-SAVVY GRADS

Belkin Playa 20K Power Bank

Provides up to 77 hours of additional battery life for your smartphone. Charge any device, including tablets, wireless earbuds, portable speakers, eReaders, and more. **$49.99**

GameStop

gamestop.com

The prices and availability of products may vary at the time of checkout

1

For the computer specialist

2

For Horror connoisseurs

BETRAYAL
AT HOUSE ON THE HILL
12+
Secret Survi
Do not rea

❶ DUEX LITE LAPTOP MONITOR

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$259.99 (12.5") | *mobilepixels.us*

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$55.99 | *avalonhill.com*

❸ TITANIC CREATIONS

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$30 (apiece) | *titaniccreations.com*

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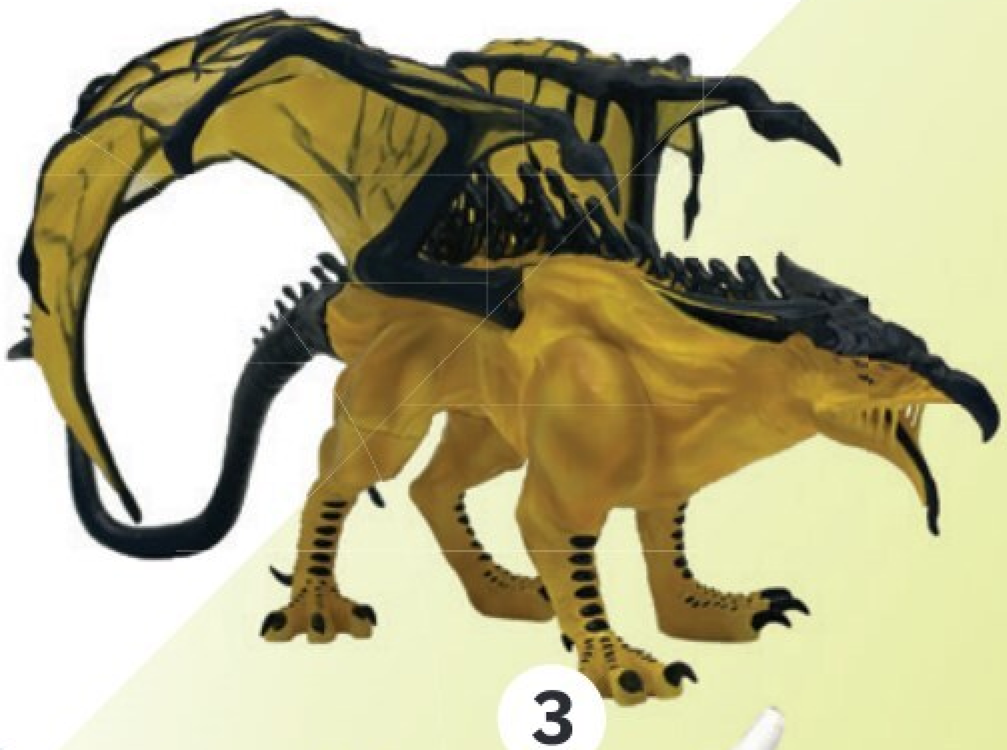
$14.99/month | *xbox.com*



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4

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THE DARK SIDE OF THE MOON

THE DEAD SPACE CREATOR RETURNS TO RECLAIM HIS SPOT IN THE SCI-FI HORROR SCENE WITH THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

by Brian Shea

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Jupiter looms large, serving as an imposing backdrop as cargo ship pilot Jacob Lee crashes on the Gas Giant's second-biggest moon. Our solar system's largest planet may play host to a seemingly eternal storm, but something far fiercer is brewing on Callisto. It's here that the creator of the Dead Space series, Glen Schofield, stages perhaps his most horrifying project yet.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Krafton
DEVELOPER Striking Distance Studios **RELEASE** 2022

Set 300 years in the future, The Callisto Protocol unmistakably carries Schofield's creative DNA, but through innovative technology, an uncompromised vision, and lessons learned from decades of development experience, Striking Distance Studios feels it has something more than a spiritual successor on its hands. The Callisto Protocol challenges players to face their fears as they descend into the depths of a lunar prison overrun by monstrous, infected humans and uncover what happened to one of our great hopes for life beyond Earth. We witnessed never-before-seen gameplay and spent hours picking the brains of Striking Distance Studios' veteran developers to learn how this team is creating one of the scariest, most intense games of 2022.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

In 2019, Schofield took a trip out to the desert to get away from the hustle and bustle of the game industry. Just months prior, he had left Activision, a publisher with whom he had worked for nearly a decade. While there, he helped lead a studio he cofounded, Sledgehammer Games, as it worked on three mainline Call of Duty titles: Modern Warfare 3, Advanced Warfare, and WWII. Schofield eventually transitioned to an executive role within Activision before leaving the company less than a year later. He decided to take some time off and plot his next move.

After 10 years of working on the Call of Duty franchise, Schofield was ready for something new. "We made three games which I'm really proud of; my time at Sledgehammer was something pretty special," he says. "I'm not getting any younger, and I was like, 'I'd like to do another new IP.'"

He left his California home for Tucson, Arizona. He spent a couple of weeks at a health resort, but in his alone time, he wandered out into the desert to get away. Schofield, who got his start in the video game industry in the early '90s as an artist on titles like The Simpsons: Bartman Meets Radioactive Man and The Ren & Stimpy Show: Space Cadet Adventures, started sketching, using the fauna of the sandy wilds as inspiration.

In these moments of quiet reflection, Schofield came up with several ideas for new games. One of those ideas was called "Meteor Down," a science-fiction survival game. The early concept had promise, but he was initially resistant to it due to the similarities between the ideas presented in Meteor Down and those in the popular series he helped create for Electronic Arts, Dead Space. In that title, players control Isaac Clarke as he navigates a derelict space station called *Ishimura*, battling reanimated, mutated human corpses called Necromorphs. While Schofield left Visceral Games and EA to cofound Sledgehammer Games shortly after the first Dead Space launched in 2008, the series continued through 2013 and remains perhaps Schofield's most well-known work.

While he was initially concerned about his new IP pulling from so many of the same inspirations as Dead Space, Schofield embraced these concepts as an unalienable part of who he is. He remembers sci-fi concepts spilling into his work, even dating back to his time at art college. Whether it was an assignment to do Mona Lisa in his own style (he chose to paint her as an alien) or to create a Western piece (he painted a space cowboy), science fiction has permeated his creative processes for decades.

Striking Distance Studios wants to make sure you never know what to expect as you turn each corner and enter each room

"By the time I graduated, my best paintings were all sci-fi," he says. "A lot of things led me to science fiction, and if you go back and you look at all my early games, there would be like Bart Simpson on the moon and there will always be something in it that had science fiction."

Upon reflecting on his past with the science-fiction genre and what it means to him, Schofield decided to jump into Meteor Down with both feet. "I'm not going to shy away from a good idea because it was in one of my games," he says. "All game makers look at ideas from other games. Picasso said, 'good artists borrow, great artists steal.' Well, why not steal from myself?"

With Schofield now looking towards the future with a vision in mind, he began shopping Meteor Down around to major publishers. He didn't just want a game deal, though; he wanted a studio deal. He put together a 30-slide PowerPoint presentation and wrote a 30-to-40-page story to present in his meetings.

After running Visceral at EA and Sledgehammer at Activision, he was ready to do it independently, with no compromises on the studio's culture or vision. Schofield met with companies like Google, Microsoft, and PlayStation to talk about his ideas for Meteor Down and his forthcoming studio and hear what they had to offer him.

After taking these meetings, Schofield determined they weren't a good fit for what he was hoping to accomplish. However, around this time, he heard that C.H. Kim, CEO of Krafton, the company behind games like PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds, was looking for "the Call of Duty guy" to start a studio in the United States. Schofield met with Krafton at DICE Summit 2019 in a hotel room in Las Vegas, Nevada and liked what they had to say.

Each time you encounter a bloody mess of a room like this, you can probably expect the culprit is nearby

"He just kept saying the right things, about building a studio and letting the creative people do their thing, which I've heard over the years, but somehow, I believed it this time," Schofield says. "C.H. has been right to his word the whole time. He has allowed us 100 percent creative autonomy."

Schofield hit it off immediately with Kim and the rest of the Krafton team. They moved forward with founding a studio with the idea of creating Meteor Down as a game within the PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds universe. But before work could begin in earnest, he needed a studio. He enlisted the help of people he had worked with in the past, such as Steve Papoutsis, who served as senior producer and executive producer on the Dead Space series, GM at Visceral Games, and had accompanied Schofield to some of the follow-up meetings with prospective Meteor Down publishers. Schofield slid into the role of founder and CEO, while Papoutsis took the position of chief development officer. Together they began charting the path of their new studio.

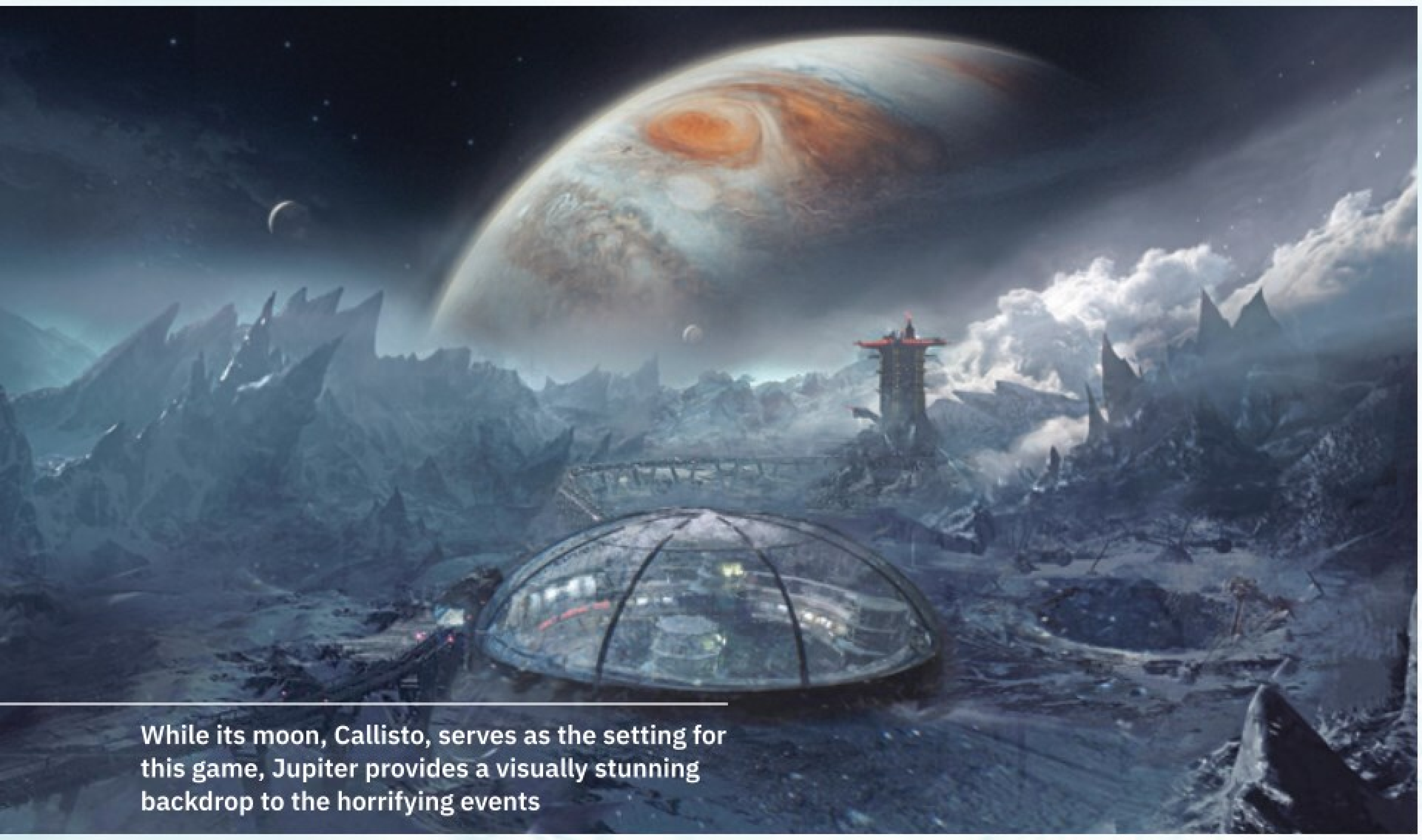
When determining a name for the new company, the duo struggled to find something that was descriptive, clever, and perhaps most importantly, not taken. After the two failed to immediately come up with a name that wasn't already being used, Papoutsis looked at Schofield and asked him what the keys to the games they were going to create were. One key tenet Schofield appreciated most about his time with Visceral and Sledgehammer was that those studios were all about creating high-quality video games. That was something Schofield wanted to carry into this new venture.

"I said, 'I want it to be within striking distance of the best quality games,'" Schofield recalls. "It worked out well because it made sense. When I was making Dead Space, I had just finished making [James Bond 007: From Russia with Love] and Bond did not get the scores that I wanted. When I was making Dead Space, I swear to you, all I talked about was quality. All the team talked about was quality. I didn't look at budget, I didn't look at the sales; I just focused on quality."

With that notion powering the work the team wanted to produce, Striking Distance Studios was born. From their decades of experience, they recognized the importance of hiring the right people to join their team. Pulling from a Rolodex of former coworkers, Schofield and Papoutsis assembled a team consisting of developers who had worked on games like Dead Space and less-established developers who could benefit from the mentorship of such seasoned industry professionals.

With the studio established and Schofield's team assembled, Striking Distance began work on the game he envisioned out in that desert, albeit with some changes. While the story of Meteor Down was about a catastrophic meteor collision kicking off the events of the story, the game Striking Distance decided to move forward with involves a colonized version of Jupiter's moon, Callisto, around the year 2320.

The result is The Callisto Protocol, the next evolution of Schofield's frightful formula. And if the final product is anything close to how tense and horrifying the exclusive gameplay we witnessed is, fans of the science-fiction horror genre are in for a treat.



While its moon, Callisto, serves as the setting for this game, Jupiter provides a visually stunning backdrop to the horrifying events

ASSEMBLING A DREAM TEAM

When founding Striking Distance Studios, CEO Glen Schofield closely examined what he wanted to do differently with his new venture, taking lessons from his time in leadership roles at both Visceral Games and Sledgehammer Games. "With [Sledgehammer Games], it was like, 'Okay, we're going to go build this studio together,' and this time I wanted to do it on my own," Schofield says. "I just kind of wanted to be like, 'This is the way I'm gonna run it. It's been a lot of freaking work, but it's nice. At the end of the day, it is the way I've wanted to do it."

One of the things Schofield valued most with Striking Distance was building a team with whom he was enthusiastic to work. "Before we went out to start pitching the game and studio, I spent a lot of time building out my dream leadership team," he says. "It started with Steve Papoutsis, our chief development officer. Steve has worked on every Dead Space ever made and took over as executive producer, VP, and GM of Visceral after I left EA. Chris Stone was another critical hire as our chief creative officer. I've also worked with Chris since the first Dead Space, and he worked with me on three Call of Duty games."

Schofield rounded out the leadership team with chief operating officer Stacey Hirata, who had impressed him with her work on the Guitar Hero franchise in the late 2000s, and chief technology officer, Mark James, who brought with him years of experience at companies like 2K and LucasArts. With Schofield's dream team assembled, Striking Distance Studios positioned itself to deliver the horrifying experience Schofield first envisioned with The Callisto Protocol.

TENSION AND APPREHENSION

Shortly after our protagonist, Jacob Lee (portrayed by actor Josh Duhamel of *Las Vegas*, *Jupiter's Legacy*, and Call of Duty: WWII), crash lands on the moon with mysterious cargo, he's thrown into the massive prison that exists in the shadow of our solar system's largest planet. The good news is Jacob's not locked up for long. However, that brings us to the bad news: Something has happened on the moon, and all hell has broken loose. Now, Jacob is caught in a desperate struggle to survive the unspeakable horrors of Callisto and its menacing prison and get to the bottom of what caused the outbreak of mutated humans known as Biophage.

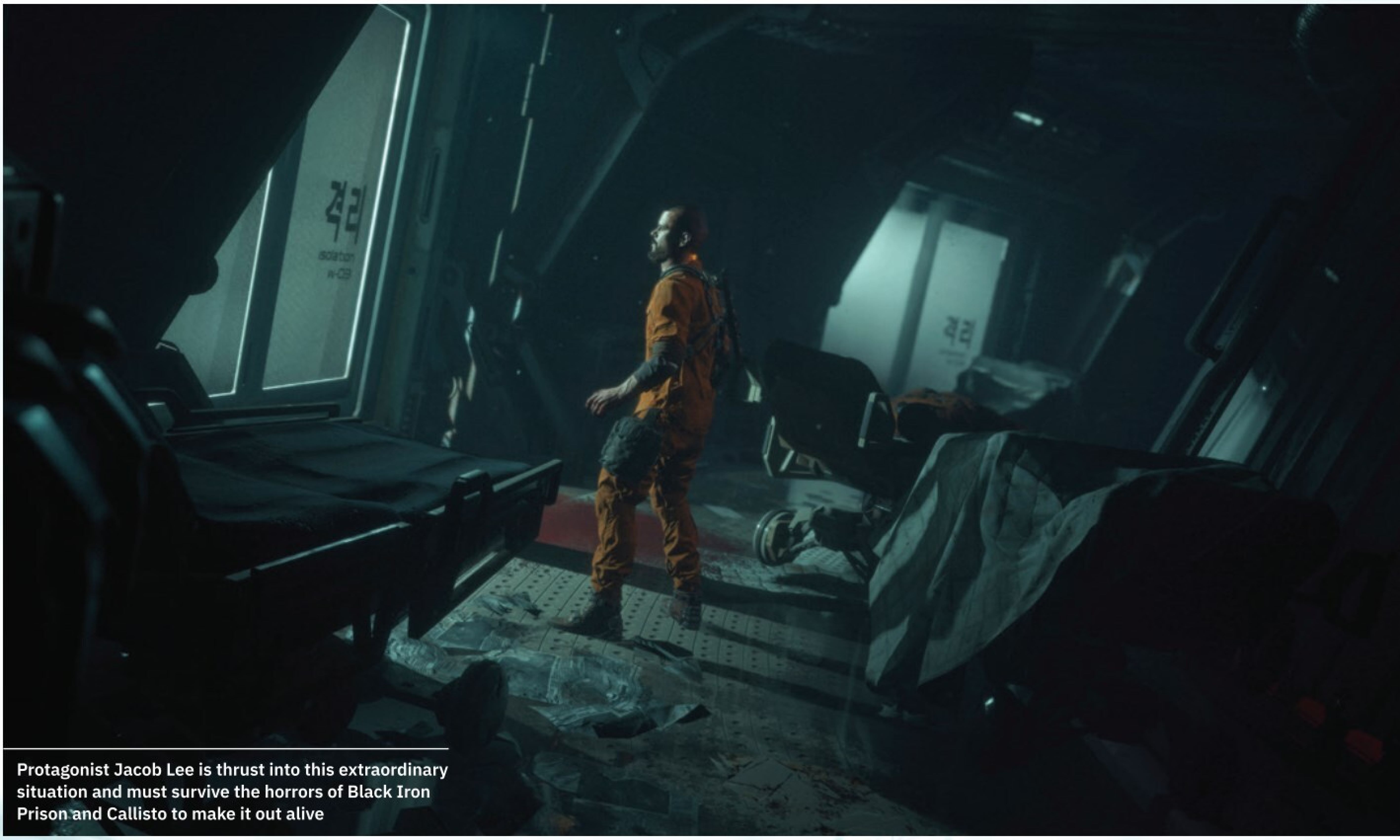
My demo with The Callisto Protocol begins in the medbay of Black Iron Prison. Flickering lights that appear to be running on emergency generators instantly set a tense tone; there's no doubt that something terrible happened here, and there's somehow even less doubt that you're about to find out what.

As Jacob approaches a bloody room with an empty gurney, a hologram flickers on. The signal may be slightly distorted, but the events it depicts are clear as a Biophage tears through two guards, quickly explaining the unsettling mess in the room.

It doesn't take long for the creature responsible to show up, and Jacob has no choice but to defend himself. Jacob is a cargo ship pilot; he isn't a soldier or a hardened criminal who would be trained or familiar with using weapons, but he has amassed a modest arsenal by this time in the game. Using a pistol, he blasts the limbs off the first creature that emerges. That initial encounter is scary enough, but that is just the basic, less evolved threat. The Callisto Protocol quickly showcases a couple of different enemy types, including a larger-bodied Biophage and a hulking tank that can take much more abuse.

These Biophage creatures are exaggerated; their grotesque mutations almost conceal their once-human forms – almost. Through a concept Striking Distance calls "designed realism," the team starts all its models with something very familiar to players, creating a more immersive form of horror. To achieve this effect, every humanlike Biophage creature's design started as a human scan in the game. From there, the art team manipulated the features to create the horrific forms you encounter as a player.

"These enemies are all grounded in reality," character director Glauco Longhi says. "We start with something that was



Protagonist Jacob Lee is thrust into this extraordinary situation and must survive the horrors of Black Iron Prison and Callisto to make it out alive

real, and now we are morphing them into something that feels a bit more than real. It's really expanding reality in a way, and we definitely want to piggyback on the idea of unleashing the beast and unleashing the animal. We want this to feel very brutal and scary and intimidating."

To combat these monsters, Jacob can use ranged attacks like his pistol and shotgun, or his melee attacks with his baton. The melee moves are dynamic based on things like Jacob's positioning and his proximity to environmental objects. In one brutal sequence, Jacob bashes in the skull of a Biophage before smashing the creature up against the nearby wall and delivering the final blow. He can also utilize combat-enders by combining his melee and ranged attacks. For instance, when you get a good combo on an enemy, a small crosshair will appear on their body as they fall back, stunned. If you aim down the sights of your gun at that moment, the weapon automatically snaps to that targeted body part, and you can get a good shot off, possibly blowing that limb clean off the enemy.

With dismemberment playing a role in how you combat the Biophage, their behavior changes if they take on permanent damage from their encounter with the player character. For example, if a Biophage loses an arm, it won't be able to grapple or grab Jacob, giving you more freedom in approaching the encounter. If you take off its legs, it must crawl to get to you, opening it up to Jacob's lethal stomp move. When you're overwhelmed or outmatched, getting creative with how you combine these abilities is of the utmost importance.

However, if things look particularly dire (or you just want to have the most fun possible), you can use Jacob's unique gravity-based GRP ability. Using this, he can grab enemies and objects from across the environment and pull them towards him or push them away. This tool, which Black Iron Prison guards used for crowd control, lets you manage overwhelming situations or experiment with unique ways to dispatch your enemies. Jacob grabs a mutated creature in one sequence and throws him directly into a spinning fan, splattering him into pieces. In another scene, Jacob comes across a spiked wall taken straight out of Mortal Kombat; I would bet the GRP abilities would very much come in handy there.

While Jacob isn't trained in combat, these weapons and skills give him a fighting chance against the monstrosities running amok in the prison. However, with enemies this threatening, the team wants to make sure every encounter – even those with the most basic creatures – feels tense and worthy of your complete attention.

"That's where we started: on the harder side of things to make sure that it felt scary," design director Ben Walker says. "We want you to be afraid of single enemies. All these tools we built up for Jacob are to deal with the difficulty as opposed to coming at it from the other end of, 'Hey, you can do all these cool things, now let's make some enemies.' We did it in reverse for that very reason. You feel scared, and you have to make the right calls at the right time."

After several of these tense encounters that show off exactly what Walker is describing, Jacob finds the medbay's exit and discovers an unsettling sight: The door opens and dismembered guards dangle from the ceiling, strung up with hooks and spikes. Though he escaped the horrors of this first area of our demo, the situation is clearly out of control, and Jacob's fight to survive is only getting started.

DESIGNING THE FUTURE

With The Callisto Protocol taking place 300 years in the future and on a moon of a faraway planet, Striking Distance Studios needed to design its environments, objects, and even its characters in forward-facing ways. While the studio has an art team full of game-industry and sci-fi veterans, to get the aesthetics just right, it enlisted help from artificial intelligence inspired by a process called "generative design."

By taking human-designed objects and putting them through this A.I., the designs are optimized for efficiency in a way that looks and feels alienlike. "We decided to apply this throughout the game," art director Demetrius Leal says. "We took a bulkhead door, and we took that language and started putting it on the door itself. And we did this with our vehicles, our weapons, some of our NPCs like a security robot. What we ended up with was this finished product with a generative design on it that integrates seamlessly with the rest of the environment."

The Callisto Protocol's dynamic melee combat combines with an arsenal of guns and a unique GRP gravity ability to give Jacob a fighting chance

DESCENDING INTO THE DEPTHS

The following demo sequence of The Callisto Protocol picks up in the basement of Black Iron Prison. Immediately, a disgusting, long-necked creature rockets out of a pod and latches onto Jacob's neck. These Biophage creatures, internally referred to by the development team as "Bloodworms," act almost as landmines you trigger if you're not careful. If you're observant enough, you can approach its pod from the correct angle and destroy it before it has the chance to spring out like a morbid Jack-in-the-Box and gnaw at Jacob's shoulder.

These creatures don't appear to be overtly deadly; they only deal minor damage to Jacob if you remove them before it bites too deep. Instead, this particular creature serves another critical purpose within The Callisto Protocol: keeping players on edge. Through creatures and scares like what this monster delivers, Striking Distance can pay off the tension it masterfully builds as you explore the desolate corridors and landscapes of Callisto.

Keeping players on their toes by balancing when they're safe and when they're in danger is paramount to maintaining the feeling of unease the studio is going for. "We'll try and get you early in the game; like when you open a door, and something's there," Schofield says. "Then, hopefully, you're worried about every door. And then after about five levels, when we don't get you with the door, you kind of let your guard down again, and then we get you. There is a lot of timing."

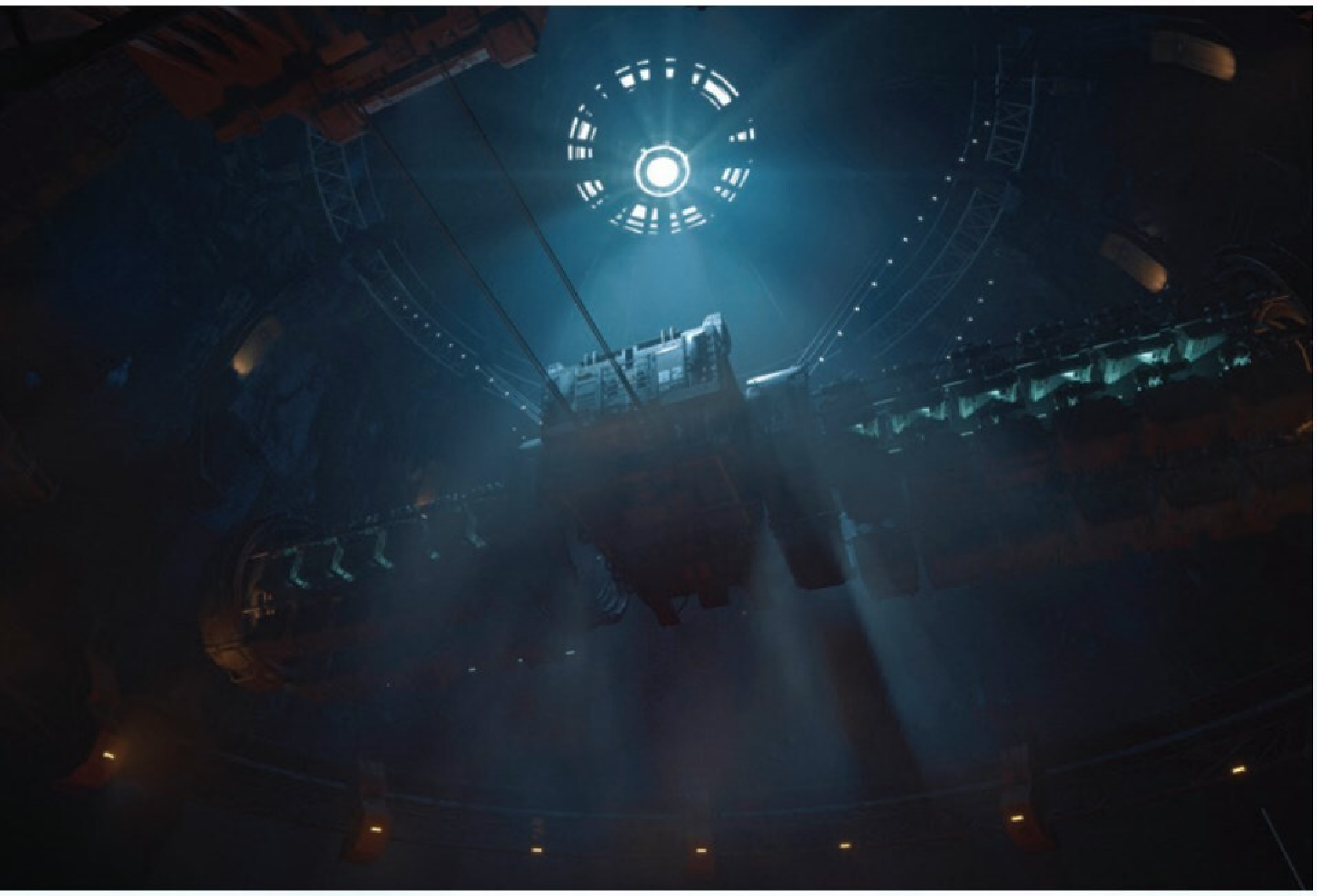
To craft these kinds of experiences, Striking Distance has coined a new term for how it builds tension and then releases it through a scare or disturbing imagery. "We have this concept that we're calling 'horror engineering,'" Papoutsis says. "Having made a lot of horror games over the years, it's really important for us to make sure that we construct these things in a meticulous way so that they have the maximum impact on players, and they can be memorable and scary and bring out all the tension, terror, fear, anxiety, apprehension that these moments can deliver."

So much of setting the tone comes from the game's stellar audio. Each horrifying discovery is accompanied by audio effects that feel straight out of your favorite horror movie. Many of these unsettling sounds come by way of The Apprehension Engine, a unique instrument created by composer Mark Korven (*The Witch*, *The Lighthouse*, *Resident Evil: Welcome to Raccoon City*) and guitar maker Tony Duggan-Smith. The two work together to create original sound effects for horror media. Striking Distance Studios uses The Apprehension Engine to great effect, enhancing the frightful exploration of Callisto and Black Iron Prison and building the tension therein.

As Jacob continues exploring the basement, he encounters more Biophage creatures, further showcasing the combat and the versatility of some of these monstrosities. One such organism is able to enter grates in other rooms and emerge from vents near the player character. These surprises are crucial to that notion of building tension and go hand-in-hand with the way the art team designed the environments of Callisto.

"In lockstep with the narrative, we want to give the players something new to explore, some new surprise, some reason to keep on going forward and explore," art director Demetrius Leal says.

I witness the team's propensity to surprise players firsthand as Jacob's time in the dark basement ends as he enters an elevator. The slow-moving lift gradually reveals a massive structure with a bright light shining above. Under normal circumstances, a well-lit area in a game like this feels like a refuge from the horrors of the dark. However, something feels menacing about the framing of the light when contrasted with the structure. Once I make out the lettering on the side of the building, my suspicions are confirmed: "SHU" – it's the Special Housing Unit where Black Iron Prison isolates its most dangerous inmates.



THE PUBG CONNECTION

When Striking Distance Studios was founded in 2019, one of the first pieces of news to emerge surrounding The Callisto Protocol was that it takes place in the universe of the popular battle royale game, PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds.

When I ask Striking Distance CEO and game director of The Callisto Protocol Glen Schofield about its relationship with PUBG, he assures players that they don't need to worry about missing out on the experience if they're unfamiliar with the battle royale title. "The idea of us being in the universe at first sounded really good, and then as you start coming up with your story we realized, 'Wow, this is a little out there,'" he says. "We built in some touchpoints, and you'll find them throughout the game like Easter eggs and things like that."

Instead of direct references to PUBG or the battle royale competition depicted in that game, Striking Distance views the PUBG universe as a timeline of stories that are connected by themes of survival. This is particularly true when you consider how far into the future The Callisto Protocol takes place.

"When we came in, they had a lore team and they were writing this big story, like, 'Where does PUBG start? Where does it fit in?'" Schofield says. "They write this giant timeline, and our writers are involved in helping. We sit on the timeline, but we sit pretty far out there, and kind of alone. So if they ever make another game, let's say that's after our timeline, I would imagine our game will inform that more than we are being informed by their timeline."

Outside of the imposing form factor of the SHU, Striking Distance Studios experiments with using light to indicate danger or to obscure your view, building further tension when contrasted with the dark environments in which most of my demo has taken place. Using the notion of creating a "cruel glare," the art team manages to use light to match the tension and unease of the darker areas.

"It's this light that's really harsh, oppressive, uninviting, and it has that feeling of emptiness," Leal says. "Usually with light, it's a glimmer of hope or something you want to go towards. We wanted to put it on its head; we wanted to do the exact opposite, where you see this thing – I call it the Angel of Death – but it's really the Special Housing Unit. It's suspended jail cells in this huge cavern. We wanted the player to feel worse as we get closer to it. We did that throughout the game."

In the moment of the SHU reveal, I'm both nervous and deadly curious about what lurks within. Unfortunately, I'll have to wait until the game is out to learn what's within, as I'm moved on to the next section of my demo. When the third and final part of my experience with The Callisto Protocol begins, it's clearly later in the game; Jacob, now donning a full spacesuit, is underground, exploring a system of dilapidated tunnels.

Before we embark on our underground adventure, the in-game camera zooms in on Jacob's detailed face. His eyes dart back and forth, and his heavy breath condensates on the glass of his helmet. This attention to detail carries through in the character designs, environments, and, of course, the gore. The tunnels make this more evident than before, as collapsed paths and obscured light showcase the level of detail the team has put into the world. However, the new enemy types in this final section of my demo show off how far the team went to portray the game's grisly environments.

As Jacob enters a rare open area of the tunnels, a bulbous Biophage spots him from another tunnel entrance. Seemingly incapacitated by the putrid growth on its back, it frantically crawls towards him, but thanks to his trusty shotgun, he blasts it away before it can get too close. Jacob continues to the next room, where he's not so lucky. This time, he misses his shot, and the Biophage explodes, knocking Jacob to the ground and raining bloody bits all around him. The sound design is equal parts fantastic and nauseating as the blood-soaked pieces of the monster fall to the floor with appropriately sopping sounds.

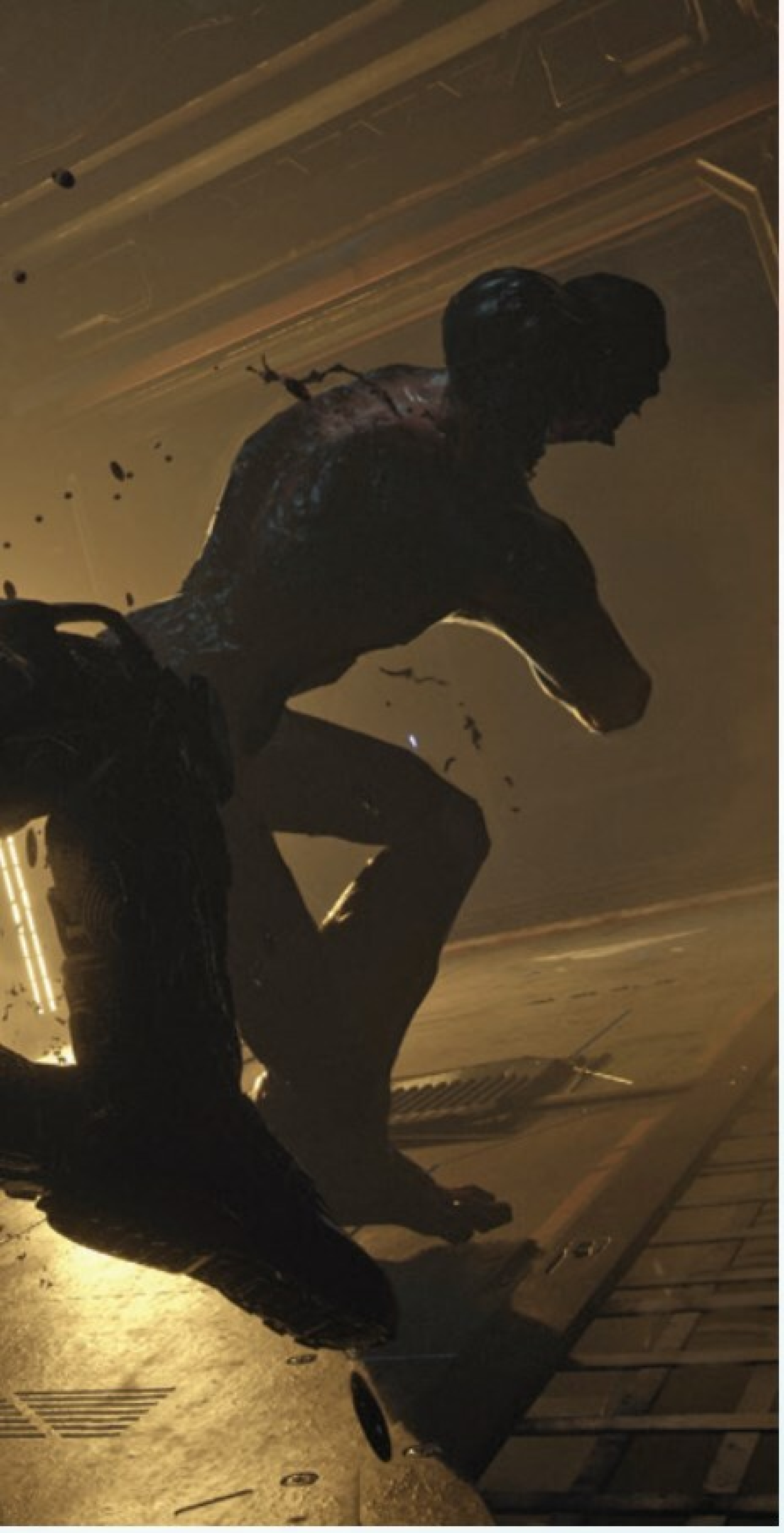
"When we talk about audio design in a game like this, it's 50 percent of the game, man," Schofield says. "It's like a mechanic; it's a feature... front and center. We love messing with the audio, constantly playing with different sounds."

WHAT ABOUT THE DEAD SPACE REMAKE?

WHAT ABOUT THE DEAD SPACE REMAKE?

About seven months after Striking Distance Studios announced The Callisto Protocol, Electronic Arts revealed it was remaking the original Dead Space. CEO of Striking Distance Studios and The Callisto Protocol game director Glen Schofield created Dead Space while he worked at Electronic Arts in the 2000s. While he's happy to see the series, which last received a new entry in 2013, live on, he's somewhat conflicted about the reveal of a remake of the 2008 game he created.

"I took [the announcement] as a compliment; I still do take it as a compliment," Schofield says. "I'm still kind of bummed about it too. There's this weird, weird thing, like you're not attached to your own game. It's a weird feeling. [...] They want to make a game better than the one you made. I do wish them well because I want to see the franchise live; that's where I want to be. I want to play it. I want them to do well. I'm glad the franchise is now given a second life."



But it's not just the excellent sound design that contributes to the authenticity of the carnage. The art team dove deep into the gruesome world of blood and guts to accurately capture the gore the studio wanted to portray in the game. Like its character designs, the studio started creating gore by looking at reality.

From studying how flesh decomposes after being shot to how blood splatters after a traumatic blow to the body, the developers of The Callisto Protocol left no stone unturned. In one sequence, we watch as a dual-mouthed monstrosity brutally bites Jacob's head off, leaving his tongue sticking out of his neck as his bloody corpse falls to the ground. In another graffic death sequence, Jacob's body gets caught in a giant ventilation fan, which tears his body in half in watch-through-your-fingers manner. The team studied real-life police videos of horrific situations for sequences like these. I won't go into the terror-inducing details of the exact situations Striking Distance Studios studied but suffice to say that even Schofield was left uneasy by the reference material.

“We definitely want the player to feel satisfied when he's shooting or very scared when he gets killed,” Longhi says. “We definitely want to play into the horror. There is a lot of gore. Gore is a really big part of how we're going to be disturbing the player and creating horror experiences.”

Thankfully, in my demo, Jacob keeps pushing forward. Before he sees the literal light at the end of the tunnel, he encounters a few more traditional Biophage creatures. They're more scaled over this time, giving off a clank sound when Jacob bashes them with his baton instead of the standard fleshy smash. These shell-like growths indicate the mutation has progressed further along than the Biophage we encountered earlier in my demo.

Jacob survives the tunnels by the skin of his teeth. As he emerges, I get my first glimpse of the surface of Callisto. A snowstorm rages, and the next stop for our protagonist looks to be an area labeled “Garage.” Sadly, that's where my time with The Callisto Protocol comes to an end.

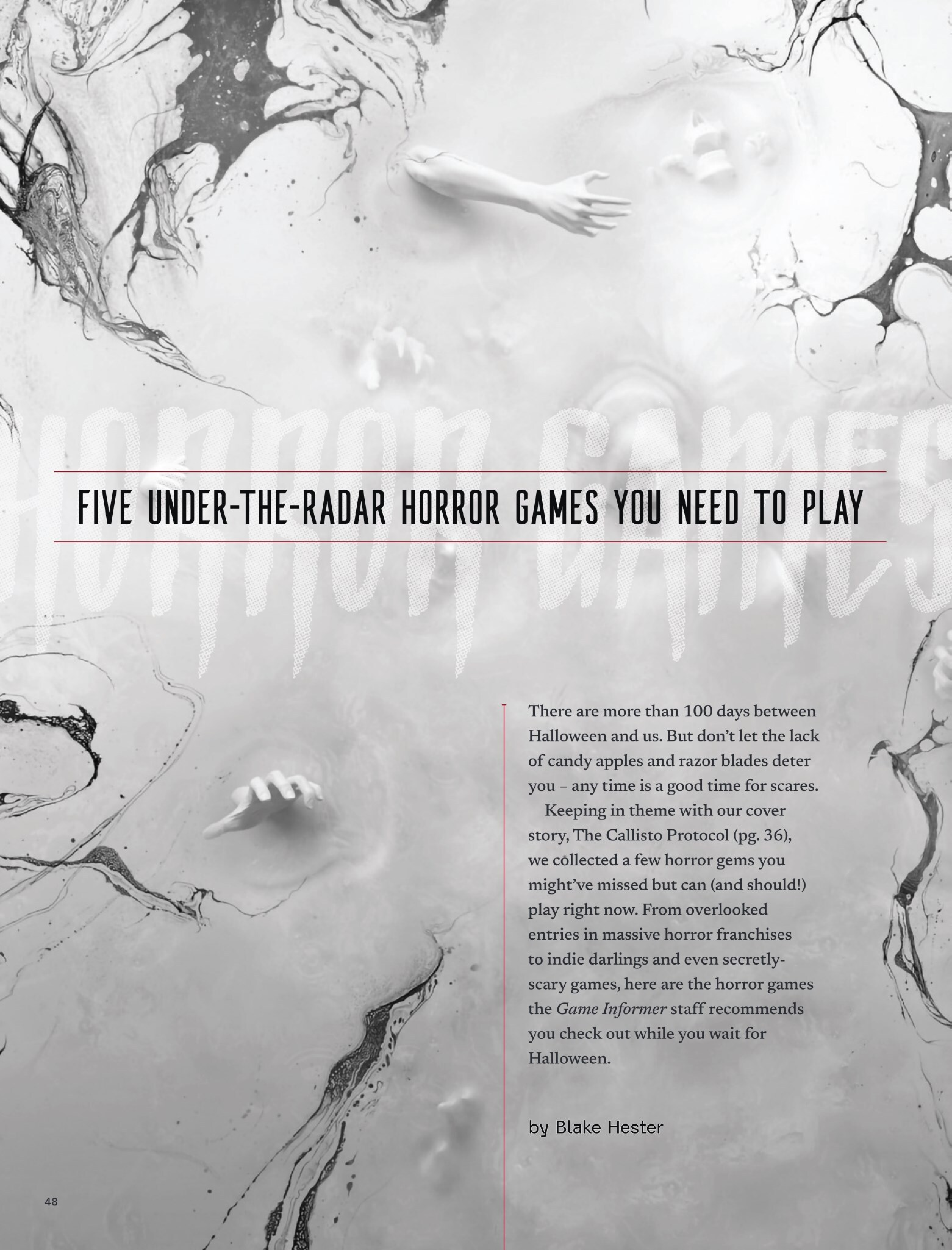
AN UNFLINCHING VISION REALIZED

After seeing The Callisto Protocol in action and speaking with the team, it's clear that the mantra of quality about which Schofield was so adamant when he founded Striking Distance Studios has persisted through the development of its debut title. Despite looking at several sequences worth of gameplay and chatting for hours about what we saw, Striking Distance Studios is playing its cards close to the vest. Further details about the game's characters, story, and what other horrors await as we dig deeper into the conspiracy of what happened on Jupiter's second-largest moon are saved for when we play the final product.

While I was disappointed in the moment that the developers wouldn't spill more details, in the hours after my demo, I couldn't stop thinking about what I had learned about the ambitious project. The horrifying imagery, the masterfully built tension, the intriguing setting and story – they all culminate in something that feels like an evolution of gaming's science-fiction horror genre.

With Schofield, Papoutsis, and their team of veteran developers at the helm of an uncompromised take on the genre they helped revolutionize in 2008, The Callisto Protocol looks like a nightmare come true for fans in the best way imaginable. I can't wait to scream along with those eager fans as I uncover the mysteries of Callisto, Black Iron Prison, and the Biophage later this year. ■

To learn more about the terrifying sci-fi vision of Glen Schofield and his team, head to our exclusive coverage hub at GameInformer.com/CallistoProtocol



FIVE UNDER-THE-RADAR HORROR GAMES YOU NEED TO PLAY

There are more than 100 days between Halloween and us. But don't let the lack of candy apples and razor blades deter you – any time is a good time for scares.

Keeping in theme with our cover story, The Callisto Protocol (pg. 36), we collected a few horror gems you might've missed but can (and should!) play right now. From overlooked entries in massive horror franchises to indie darlings and even secretly-scary games, here are the horror games the *Game Informer* staff recommends you check out while you wait for Halloween.

by Blake Hester

RESIDENT EVIL 4 VR

RESIDENT EVIL 4 VR

At first blush, it's odd to put Resident Evil 4 on a list of lesser-known horror titles; it's arguably one of the most-played horror games of all time. But its recent port to the Oculus Quest 2 came and went, which is unfortunate because it's one of the best ways to play the now 17-year-old game.

If, like me, you've played Resident Evil 4 front to back more times than you even know, the move to VR is the closest you're likely to get to it ever feeling fresh again. The switch to first-person and the ability to freely move in combat for the first time basically makes this a new game – a fresh perspective on a familiar feeling – and the ability to get up close and personal to environments, monsters, and characters is a novel addition.

But more importantly: in VR, Resident Evil 4 is *scary*. Monsters like El Gigante tower over your actual head. The disgusting burst of a Las Plagas ripping out of its host is almost too much to stomach. Not to mention the often overwhelming number of enemies surrounding you as you desperately try to defend yourself.

Nearly 20 years later, Resident Evil 4 VR is one of the best and freshest ways to play this horror classic.

THE EVIL WITHIN 2

THE EVIL WITHIN 2

There was plenty of big talk around the first The Evil Within. Mainly due to its director, Shinji Mikami. It was his return to survival horror – a genre he helped invent and popularize with the very first Resident Evil and then revolutionized with the aforementioned Resident Evil 4. It was also the first game from his Bethesda-backed studio Tango Gameworks.

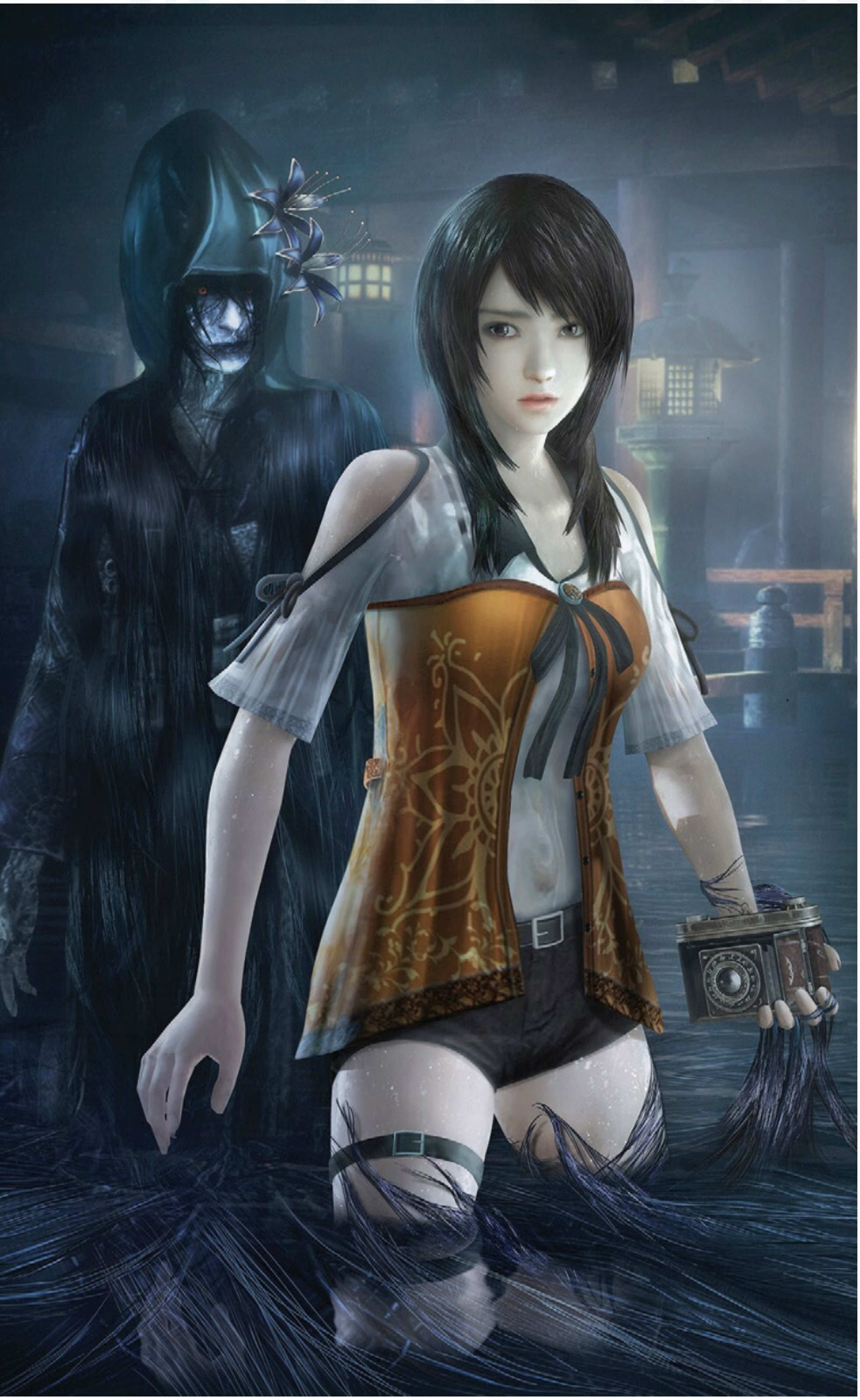
And it turned out well; a fairly run-of-the-mill horror game – rough around the edges but full of heart and some good scares.

The Evil Within 2, though? Now that's a *great* game.

Picking up after the first game's events, Evil Within 2 employs the Kitchen Sink method when it comes to horror. Which is to say, it throws a whole lot at you and hopes something sticks. Where the game excels is its fantastic art and boss direction, often feeling impossibly large, hard to comprehend, and terrifically scary.

The kicker of this whole thing: The Evil Within 2 is on Xbox Game Pass. Play it with the lights off. You're in for a hell of a time.

FATAL FRAME: MAIDEN OF BLACK WATER



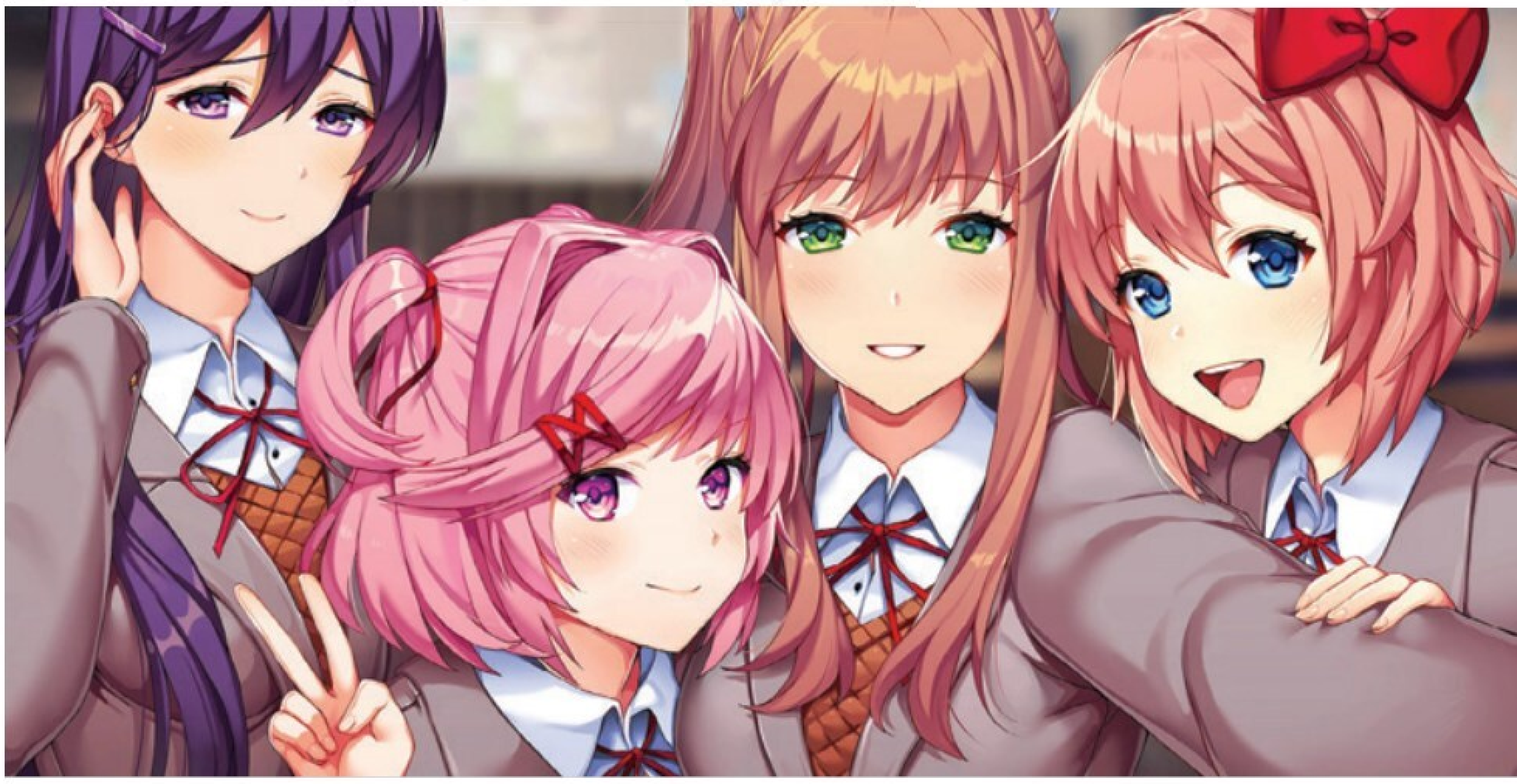
The Fatal Frame series never got a fair shake, wholly overshadowed by the Japanese horror game titans, Resident Evil and Silent Hill. But if you like horror that robs you of power, you owe it to yourself to play a Fatal Frame.

When Maiden of Black Water was first released back in 2014, it was raked over the coals by most critics, including *Game Informer*, which gave it a 5.5. However, a new Switch port has smoothed over some of the rough edges. Unless you want to track down a PlayStation 2 or original Xbox and a copy of the original few FF games, this is your best bet for experiencing one of Japan's best horror series.

The Fatal Frame games operate by the same mechanics: you're in a spooky location full of big bad spirits with only a special camera to help you. You walk around and take pictures of the ghosts, which damages them. There are no guns, but your camera is more or less a gun.

The Fatal Frame franchise is special, and even if Maiden of Black Water isn't the best entry in the series, it's worth seeking out. Where Resident Evil and Silent Hill often looked to America for inspiration, Fatal Frame feels rooted in Japanese horror – both traditional and more contemporary, such as the "J-horror" boom of the late '90s and early aughts (think *Ring*, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, and *Kairo*). This dynamic lends the series a persistent sense of dread and unease. It never scares you outright through jump scares or cheap thrills; instead, it lets your unease build and build until finally, simply playing the game is a wholly terrifying experience.

DOKI DOKI LITERATURE CLUB



You'd be forgiven if you didn't play Doki Doki Literature Club after learning it's a visual novel – who has time for all that? But one of the best horror games in years lies beneath its bland exterior.

On the surface, Doki plays out like your average easy-to-skip visual novel: you join a school club, meet many high school girls, and then problematically have your chance to seduce them. This should be enough to make any rational person say, "No thanks! I'm an adult; pretending to date high schoolers is gross!" But bear with us.

We can't say much for fear (ha!) of spoilers, but after the set-up, Doki sends the player straight to Hell. Suicide, decomposing bodies, vomit, corrupted save files, and more await you. Subverting every trope in the visual novel formula, it's one of the bleakest games in recent memory and will haunt you long after you finish playing.

VISAGE

Remember P.T.? That "Playable Teaser," as it's called, for the now-canceled Silent Hills, directed by Metal Gear Solid creator Hideo Kojima in collaboration with Guillermo Del Toro? It's easily one of the scariest "games" of all time, and now you can't play it anymore. Sure, Silent Hills almost certainly wasn't in production yet, but the ideas of what it could have been, based on P.T., will long haunt us.

Luckily, the spirit of P.T. lives on across the game industry – most notably in the indie space, where developers have taken the teaser's core ideas and turned them into something great. Case in point: Visage. Or, as my colleague and former *Game Informer* senior editor Dan Tack likes to call it, "the scariest game of all time."

Functionally, Visage plays out a lot like P.T. A man kills his family, dooms his own home to hauntings, and now as the player, you have to deal with it. But where some horror games rely on blood and gore to scare the player, Visage is a threat to your psyche; what you think you might see is always far scarier than what you do see.

We will never play Silent Hills, but you can play Visage on just about every modern console. And we recommend you do. It's one of the best psychological horror games to date, transcending its source material and finding its place in the horror game canon. ■

INSIPA

The Invincible

Hands-on with a desolate new world **by BLAKE HESTER**

W

When discussing the founding of Starward Industries, game director Marek Markuszewski brings up all the points you might expect from a new team. The company wanted to gather a group of experienced but still-passionate developers, all focused on the idea of creating something ambitious despite the studio's smaller size. The surprise, however, comes from the studio's approach to narrative. According to Markuszewski, Starward looked for stories that weren't already "exploited" by media when figuring out its first project. It wanted to tell a story that hadn't been told.

Admittedly, where Starward landed was a story told before – almost 60 years ago, in the novel *The Invincible*, written by Stanisław Lem. In it, the crew of the *Invincible* spacecraft investigates the planet Regis III for its missing sister ship. There they discover self-replicating machines that, over time, become more hostile. It ponders questions about what it means to be alive, the ever-increasing role of technology in everyday life, and has more than its fair share of retro-futurism, proper nouns, and heady jargon.

For Starward, comprised of developers previously from CD Projekt Red, Techland, and more, it was the right fit for its narrative ambitions – something dense and literary. And for what it's worth, video game adaptations of novels are relatively rare.

In Starward's The Invincible, you assume the role of Yasna, a scientist. In typical video game fashion, the protagonist is a somewhat unreliable narrator. She knows she's a scientist. She knows she came here with a crew that's since gone missing. But many of her memories are foggy. A voice on the other end of an earpiece, that of the "Astrogator," helps you along your journey.

It's all fairly standard video game fare, though the source material is an interesting starting point. Lem was known for his approach to hard sci-fi, and the world of *The Invincible* feels well-realized and believable within its fiction. It's perfectly conceivable to imagine it translating to a video game well, where players are incentivized to explore, experiment within, and discover the world around them. And for the next hour, with insights from the team, I have the chance to do just that.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Starward Industries
DEVELOPER Starward Industries **RELEASE** 2022

Slides

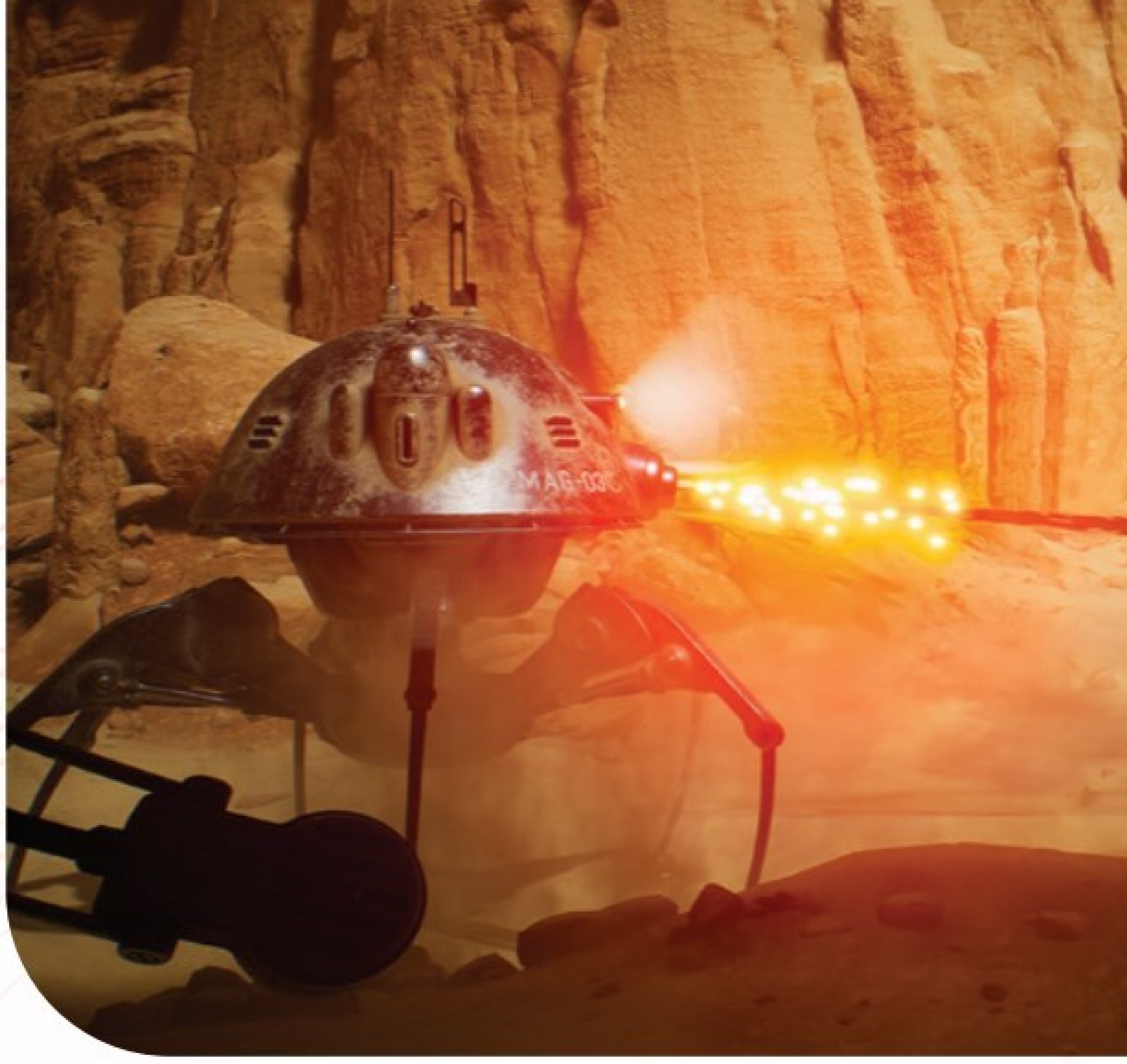
My time playing an early pre-alpha build of The Invincible begins with Yasna exploring her surroundings, taking note of her findings, and reporting back to the Astrogator. I'm looking for a lost convoy – and perhaps other survivors. Things aren't going well.

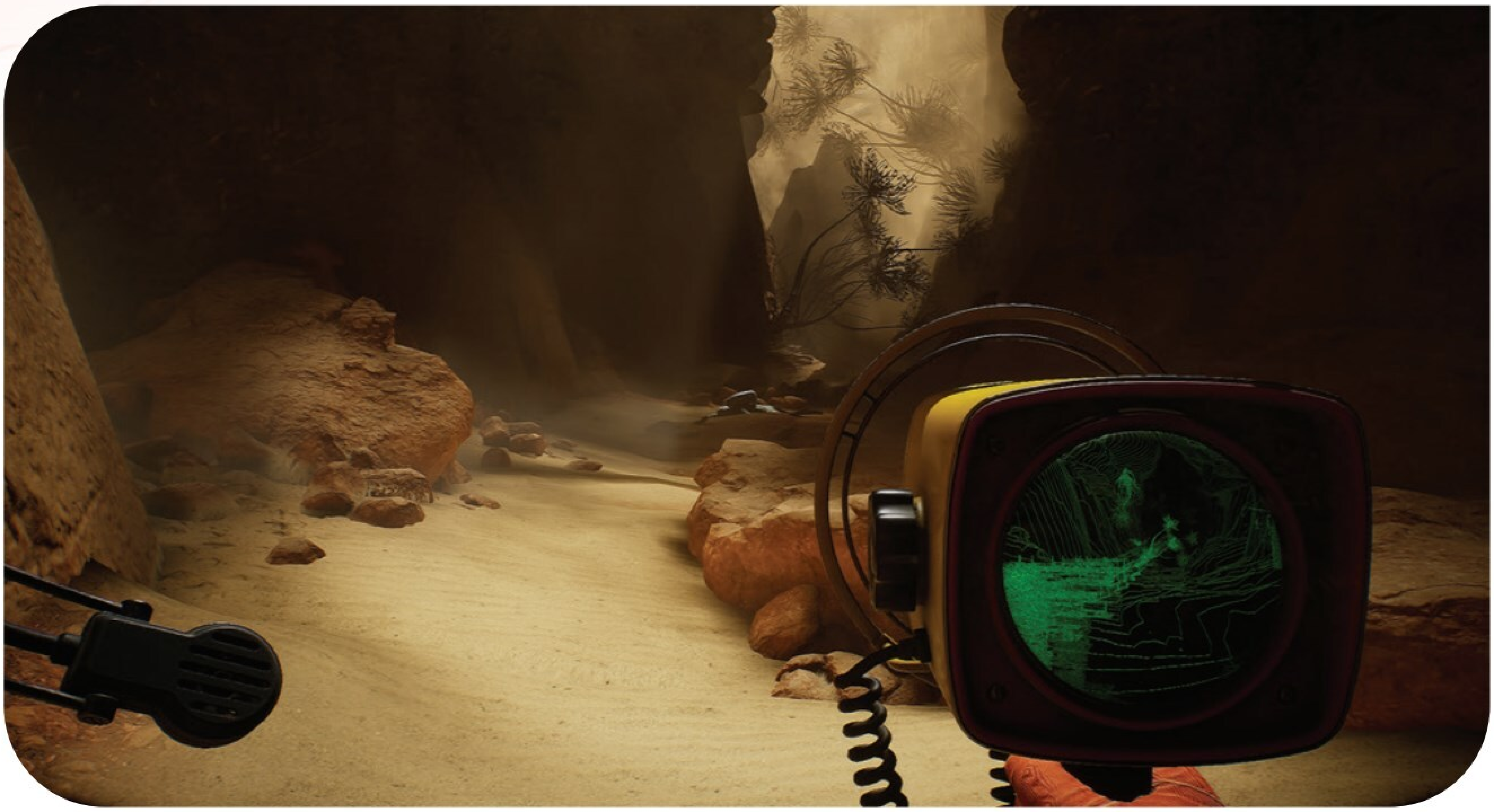
One of the most immediate things about The Invincible is that fidelity-wise, it looks great. Textures have lots of definition – I can really tell these are rocks everywhere I look – and the bright bask of the sun gives off a feeling of warmth as it bakes the ground around Yasna. Regis III mostly looks like Mars – red, arid, dull. But in a way that drives home the desolation of the setting. There isn't much to do in The Invincible other than go forward and look around. The environment gets that point across.

So, forward I go. I can go around stealthily or move directly to my objective. I choose to take the direct route. After a short drive, I find one of the convoy's vehicles trapped under a collapse of rocks. Yasna notes that the radiation levels in the area are high. I climb through the vehicle and out the other side of the collapse, running across a machine that will soon mean trouble: a mobile antimatter cannon. Well, two, to be specific. One intact. One destroyed. Nearby is a massive tunnel blown clean through a rock face. One final discovery awaits me: a corpse.

Yasna removes the onboard recorder from the antimatter cannon, and the scene of carnage in front of me begins coming into focus. Yasna sees the missing convoy marching towards its destination. Things seem to be going well. However, the plan goes awry upon reaching Yasna's current location.

One slide shows the team using the antimatter beam to make their own path through the rock, retrieving materials from the tunnel they created with the antimatter cannon. The next slide shows the convoy rushing out of their new hole. Another shows the cannon firing into the hole. And then, chaos. One of the antimatter cannons shoots at the other, obliterating it, before turning its beam onto the humans. As you might expect, it tears them apart. "It's monstrous what the antimatter beam does to the human body," Yasna remarks. Finally, she looks at the final slide, a still image of herself just moments ago inspecting the cannon. She's shocked but decides to continue her exploration, turning her sights to whatever's on the other side of the tunnel.





Dense

It doesn't take long to figure out The Invincible is a slow game – both literally and narratively. It takes time to do just about anything, from walking to your objective (there is, thankfully, a sprint button which I found after some time in the menus) to listening to Yasna and the Astrogator talk, which they do – a lot.

According to Markuszewski, this is a deliberate choice, which makes sense. The work of Stanisław Lem is, again, dense. Lem is often categorized as a "hard" sci-fi author, meaning the work is focused on being scientifically accurate and believable based on current technologies and theoretical possibilities.

"He was kind of a prophet, writing about things like [the] matrix, ebooks," Markuszewski says.

"Internet," art director Wojtek Ostrycharz adds.

"Internet, cell phones," marketing manager Maciej Dobrowolski pipes in. "All those things, yeah."

It takes time for that information and exposition to be relayed to the player via visuals and dialogue. As Markuszewski points out, in a book, you can spend as many pages as you want to describe how something looks or a character's thoughts and feelings. Video games don't quite have that luxury; adapting *The Invincible* into something interactive has been a challenge.

"If you're going with the much more conventional [video game] approach, like real-time action, leading a character, being in the place – normal pacing, normal speed – you don't have this stop-moment [to visualize] all the very attractive parts of the book," Markuszewski says. "It's tricky to have really short slots for describing all the emotions or concepts [that we want to discuss]."

Based on my time with the game, I think Starward could work on that balance more. Contrary to what Markuszewski says, I spend a large portion of my playtime doing very little, just listening to characters speak, occasionally choosing a dialogue prompt. If there's one major issue I have so far, it is the game's pacing. It's hard to know how much Starward can fix this before launch, but with such an interesting story concept, it's a shame that it's delivered in often-tedious ways.

Danger

At the end of the tunnel, I find a little robot carrying a crate in circles around a cave. Yasna later notes the robot is stuck in his task.

Deeper in, I find metallic plants growing from the cave walls. Yasna and the Astrogator then debate the nature of biology – whether or not the metal in front of us can be classified as alive or not if it lacks things like membranes, organs, and the like. All very heady stuff, with the jargon theoretical science fiction fans eat up, slowly doled out as you stand still, waiting for The Invincible to give you your next objective.

On my way to my new point B, my little robot, for reasons never made abundantly clear, breaks his loop and begins walking out of the cave. I follow suit, making my way back to the location with the two antimatter cannons. As my mechanical companion walks along his new route, making his way on a new adventure, the in-tact antimatter cannon springs to life. It shoots the robot, completely disintegrating it, before turning its cannon towards me.

I ready my hands to dodge out of the way, then to fight back, to save my own life from what would otherwise be sudden death. I remember those slides I slowly looked through, recalling the way it tore through the convoy. I'm ready to use their failures to my advantage, to save my own life from utter destruction. On the other end of the line, Astrogator begins panicking, knowing I'm likely mere seconds from death. "Fight," he yells into my ear.

To not spoil anything, I'll stop short of revealing more of what I played. If you're excited for The Invincible or a fan of the novel, some of the narrative moments you're looking forward to come next. After this initial set-up and some further exploration, I will say that I'm left with many questions about what's happening on Regis III and who is on the desolate planet.

Think

My numerous questions stem mainly from seeing a later-stage mission largely out of context. One conversation between Yasna and Astrogator stands out to me – the earlier chat about the metal plants, biology, and the human condition.

I don't think that particular moment has anything interesting to say – or anything other games haven't already explored in great detail, such as 2017's Nier: Automata, for example. But I do like a video game asking these questions – if only because it's a rare example of a big-budget game taking the time to explore more nuanced, mature questions, even if a specific moment isn't adding too much to the conversation. In its current form, I have problems with how The Invincible is telling its story structurally, but I can't help but feel like its themes are a welcome change of pace. And I feel that's exactly what Starward was going for – that the developers want players to think about new concepts and ideas.

"I had this one great feeling when I was playing Persona 5, where after an hour and a half of playing that game, I actually had to stop, go outside, have a cigarette, and go, 'Oh my God, I can't believe what this game is about,'" Starward's community manager Michał Napora says. "Maybe people don't need to go at [it in] this extreme way – go out and smoke cigarettes – but it'd be cool if they finish the game and maybe thought about some things that they didn't think about before." ■

QUICK TAKE

The past two years have been a lot. Stuck hunkered down alone, ruminating about 1,001 simultaneous disasters, has felt, at times, not unlike the unfurling of a drawn-out, Kubrick-flavored horrorshow. The twist is that I'm craving *just that*. When everything is spinning a little too fast, all I want is to slow down and look at something pretty, or awful, or both. The Invincible promises an uncanny otherworld to explore, rife with slow-burn environmental storytelling – precisely the meditative thrill for someone like me.

- LALEH AZARSHIN

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HOGWARTS LEGACY

Getting sorted

March's PlayStation State of Play broke the silence surrounding Hogwarts Legacy with a first look at gameplay. Initially announced in 2020, the title has had a bumpy development road, as it's been caught in the wave of backlash against Harry Potter writer J.K. Rowling's anti-transgender rhetoric and suffered an ambiguous delay last year. However, in the latest reveal, the creators confirmed Hogwarts Legacy is coming in 2022.

Set in the late 1800s, players are able to conjure up a new central figure. The character creator allows fans to tailor the protagonist's look, hair color, skin tone, gender, facial scars, etc. This new hero steps into wizarding's elite institution with a heavy destiny. The young student is uniquely capable of unlocking the secrets behind an ancient, almost forgotten magic that has mysteriously reemerged at the renowned institute. But before diving into that adventure, the new 5th-year transfer needs to get ready for the school year.

Players initially take part in Hogwarts' famous sorting ceremony, after which you get settled into the richly detailed castle dormitories and common rooms. You also have the run of the schools' famously maze-like interiors, and the few glimpses we got at these spaces looked captivating. The presentation showed off tangled, sun-lit staircases, hallways littered with enchanted paintings – some of which players will be able to interact with – kitchens stuffed with house-elves preparing the students' meals, and even an art nouveau-inspired swimming pool complete with nautically-themed spouts.

You can socialize with your classmates in many of these settings, growing a personal bond that may eventually lead to the characters revealing their individual histories. With a strong enough friendship, they may even choose to join you on adventures outside the school grounds.

You have to attend classes as Hogwarts' newest student. The gameplay revealed a large array of courses that fans of the series would expect. The subjects include charms, defense against the dark arts, herbology, potions, beasts, broom flight, and more. Learning will play a prominent role in the game, as enhancing your skills will influence many parts of your experience.

Hogwarts Legacy's progression system centers on talents, upgrades, and skills. Your core talents, represented in the game by intricate-looking cards, improve your overarching abilities. Whether you gravitate towards spellcasting, magical plant properties, or mixing potions, you can make your wizard excel by dumping talent points into your desired fields. You can obtain these points by taking on challenges spread throughout the game, one of which involved uncovering a hidden manuscript.

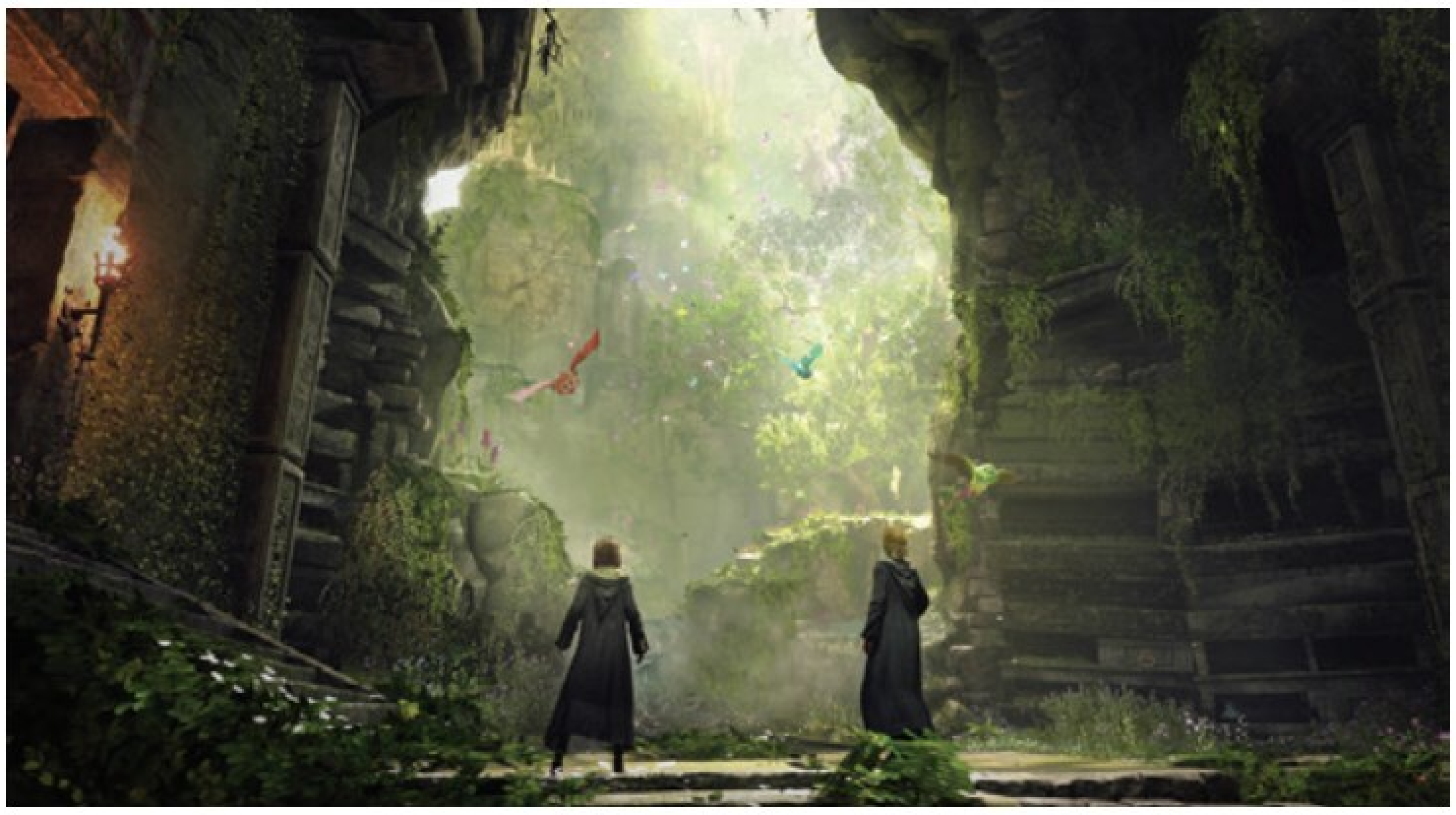
But, as you are a new transfer student, it seems you need to catch up to the level of your fellow students. To accomplish this, you get the option to engage with side assignments; one example shown looked like a kind of magical shuffleboard game. You also get access to The Room of Requirement. The aptly-named chamber provides a space to grow your magical plants, brew needed potions, upgrade essential gear, and enter the Vivarium. The presentation confirmed that this enchanted structure is a portal to an idyllic green world. Here, if the player has enough resources, they can build a world after their own heart, creating a place to help raise magical beasts or aid in several vital educational or narratively-important tasks.

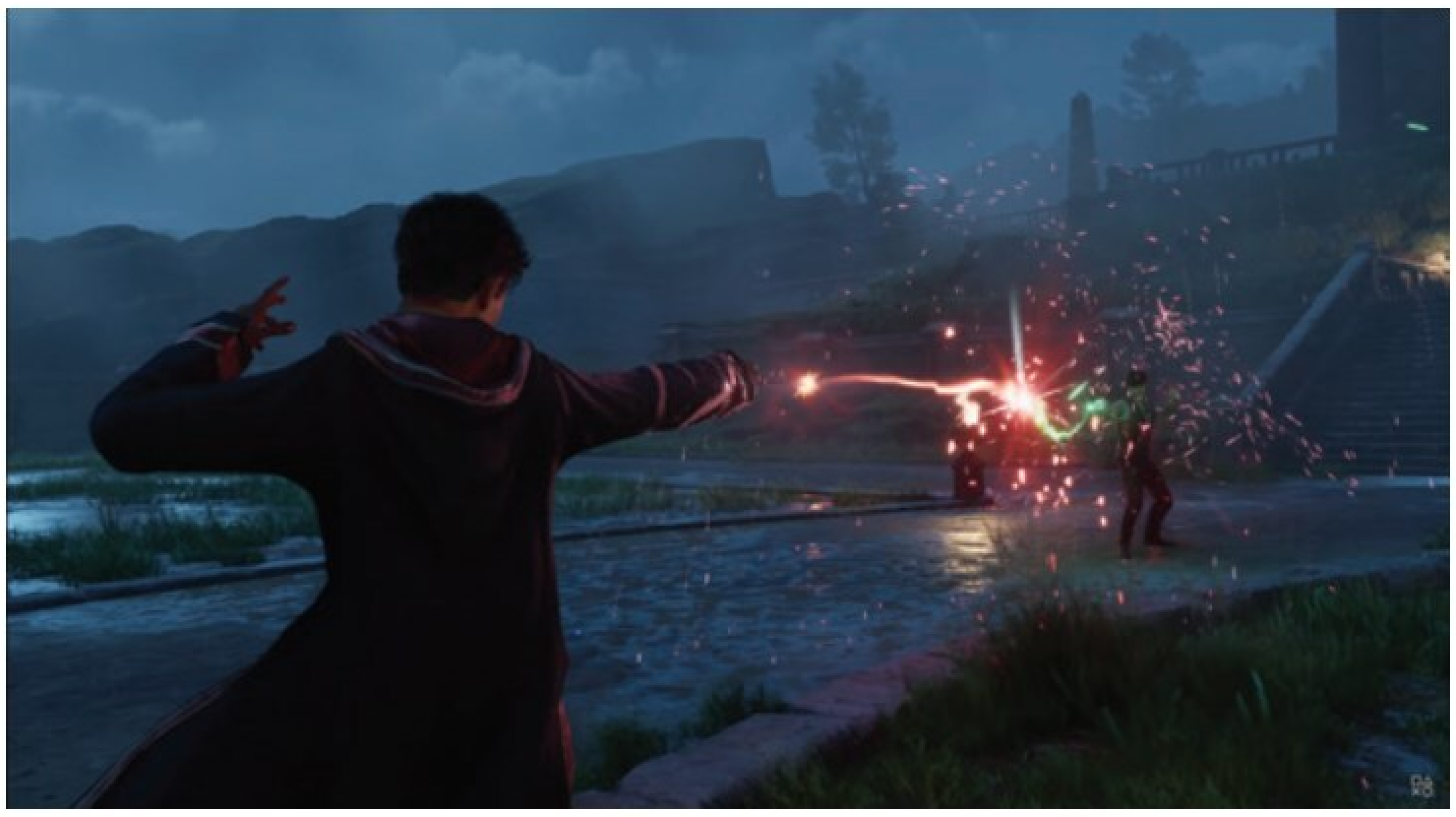
But even the most studious wizard needs to take a break now and then. There is plenty to see and do outside the walls of the famous school for witchcraft and wizardry, and with the game's dynamic weather system, locations are never the same twice. The various shops and attractions at the nearby Hogsmeade Village beckon with promises of all kinds of wizarding supplies. Players can also roam the countryside on their brooms if they've got the skills, finding side quests in the game's various hamlets, magical puzzles, dungeons, and vaults.

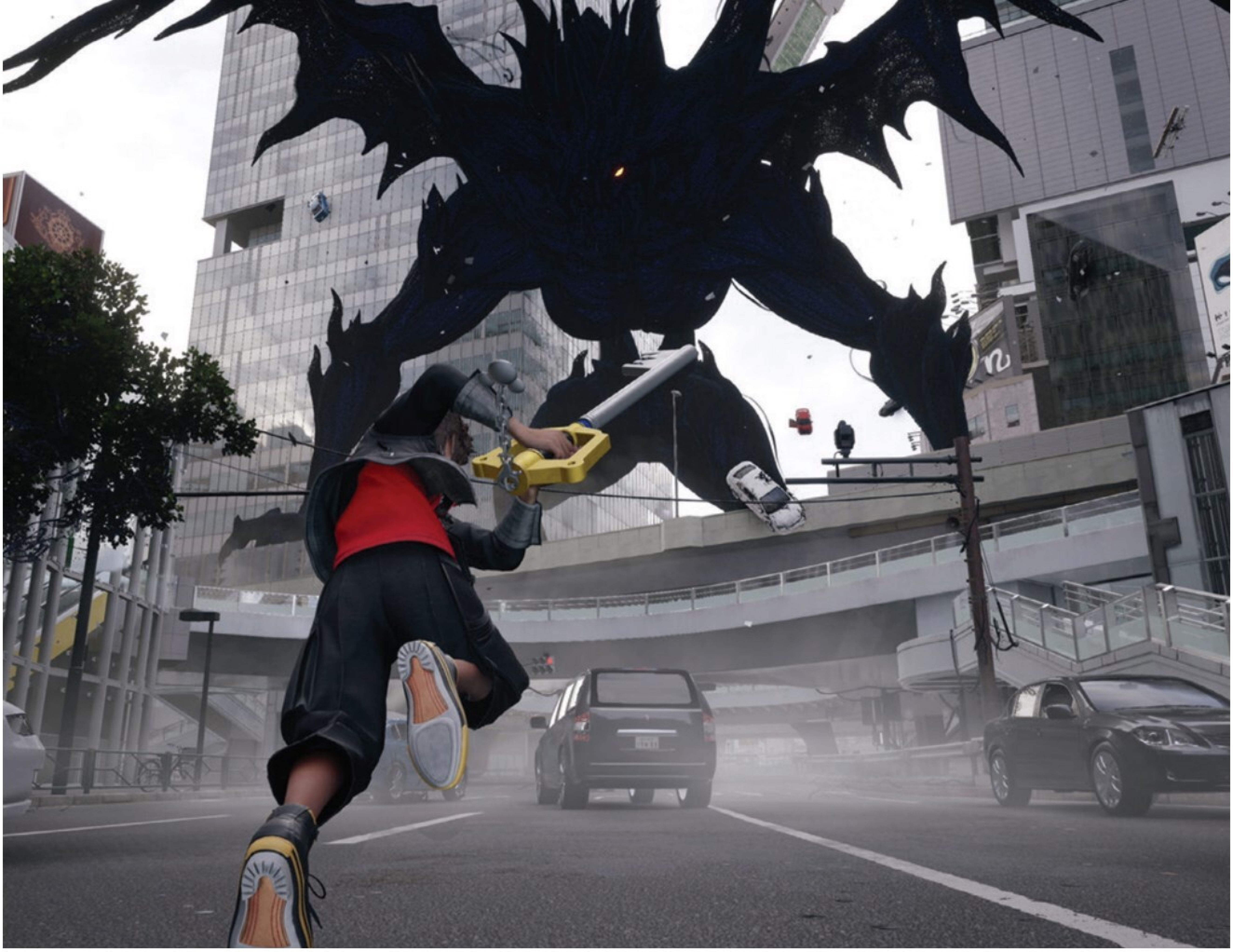
Leaving the protection of the game's namesake also means stepping into a dangerous world. As the story progresses, it seems our young pupil crosses paths with nefarious groups looking to exploit the emerging ancient magic. The recent demo hints at several antagonistic forces, including militant goblins, dark wizards, and a sinister force taking over magical beasts. The protagonist has to battle through all of those threats using every trick Hogwarts can teach them.

This new look into the Avalanche Games' title promises a wide-ranging and immersive journey into the wizarding world, though we'll have to wait and see if all the ingredients make a potent brew when the game hits later this year. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Avalanche Software **RELEASE** Holiday 2022







KINGDOM HEARTS IV

Sora's journey gets real

Kingdom Hearts lavishly celebrated its 20-year anniversary, throwing a huge party in Toyko, Japan. It featured stained-glass artworks, a live musical performance, and on-stage appearances by key figures such as director Tetsuya Nomura and composer Yoko Shimomura. But nothing could top the moment when Kingdom Hearts IV was officially introduced, showcasing a more realistic-looking Sora in a much different world. The trailer ushered the series into a new era and made it clear that Sora's journey is about to get a lot more real.

Kingdom Hearts III ended the Dark Seeker Saga. Kingdom Hearts IV is the start of the Lost Master arc, a new entry point for fans old and new. In a recent interview with *Famitsu*, Nomura compared the Lost Masters to "an opposing force much like Organization XIII," but said they don't all have the same intentions and that the game explores their different motives.

Kingdom Hearts IV's most striking change is Sora's appearance. For two decades, we've seen him resemble more a Disney cartoon than a realistic human, but the iconic character has a different aesthetic now – one that's closer to a Final Fantasy character from Square Enix's recent entries. " ... since the Lost Master Arc is starting anew, we did intentionally change things up," Nomura said in the same *Famitsu* interview. "We also wanted the designs to match the nature of the world."

The new world featured in the trailer is Quadratum, an expansive city that looks very close to our real world. Past games referred to Quadratum as "a world on the other side," not connected to the realm of light, the realm of darkness, or the realm in between. To Sora, this is a fictional world, but the Quadratum people see it the other way around.

What we saw of Quadratum looks like a faithful recreation of Tokyo, especially the Shibuya ward. This comparative quality is making fans wonder if there is a connection to The World Ends With You. However, Nomura shot down any connections in the *Famitsu* interview, saying, "Strictly speaking, Quadratum's Shibuya is a different world to TWEWY's Shibuya. Some fans think there's a connection with TWEWY or Stranger of Paradise Final Fantasy Origin, but there is no connection."

Donald and Goofy appeared in the trailer to ensure fans that the series' Disney ties are still there. The world selection process is currently in progress for Kingdom Hearts IV, so we have no confirmation on what Disney or Pixar properties will appear in the game. In the trailer, Donald and Goofy are in Sora's original world, searching for clues to his whereabouts. It also shows Sora interacting with a mysterious character named Strelitzia, who fans may know from playing the mobile game Union X.

The trailer starts with Sora waking up in an ordinary room. The location was confirmed by Nomura as Minami Aoyama (a district of Minato, Tokyo, Japan). He said this room functions as a hub for an early part of the game. From here, we see our first glimpse of Kingdom Hearts IV's gameplay as Sora faces off against a giant Heartless, who has a more realistic bent to match the world. Sora leaps toward it, swinging on a utility pole to launch himself in the air, very reminiscent of Dream Drop Distance's Flowmotion feature. We also see his keyblade transform into a grappling hook. Nomura confirmed the return of Kingdom Hearts II's reaction commands, which you can spot if you look closely in the trailer.

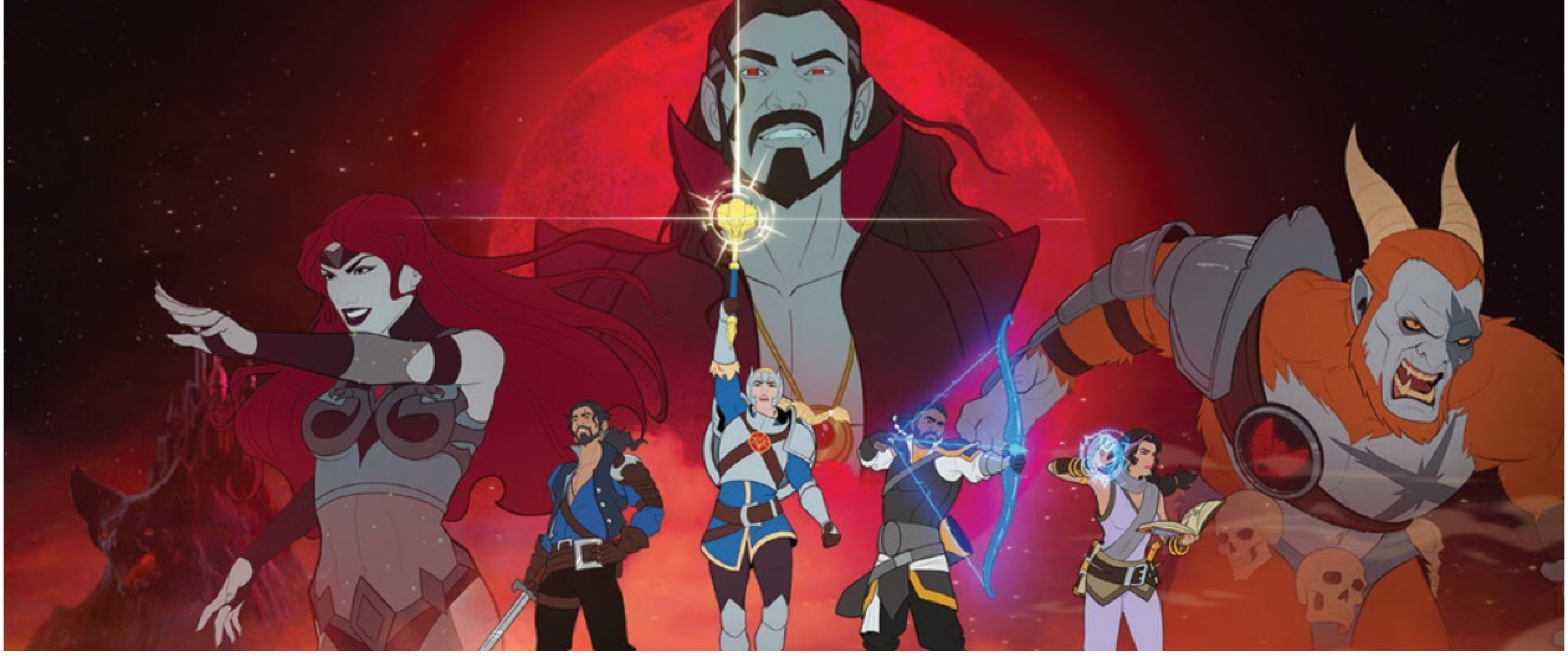
Kingdom Hearts IV is still early in development, and Nomura set expectations by saying there wouldn't be any news for a while. Everything we saw in the trailer was created using Unreal Engine 4, but development has already moved to Unreal Engine 5.

The celebration event didn't just shed light on Kingdom Hearts IV. Fans were also treated to a new mobile game announcement: Kingdom Hearts Missing-Link for iOS and Android. The game allows you to play in action-packed battles solo or with other players. It features a traditional story mode where you advance through quests alongside an AR location-based walking mode like Pokémon Go. In addition, Square Enix also revealed the final chapter of Dark Road launches in August as a free update to the Kingdom Hearts Union X Dark Road app.

After 20 years, Kingdom Hearts is entering a new era, which is exciting as the possibilities are endless.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** TBA



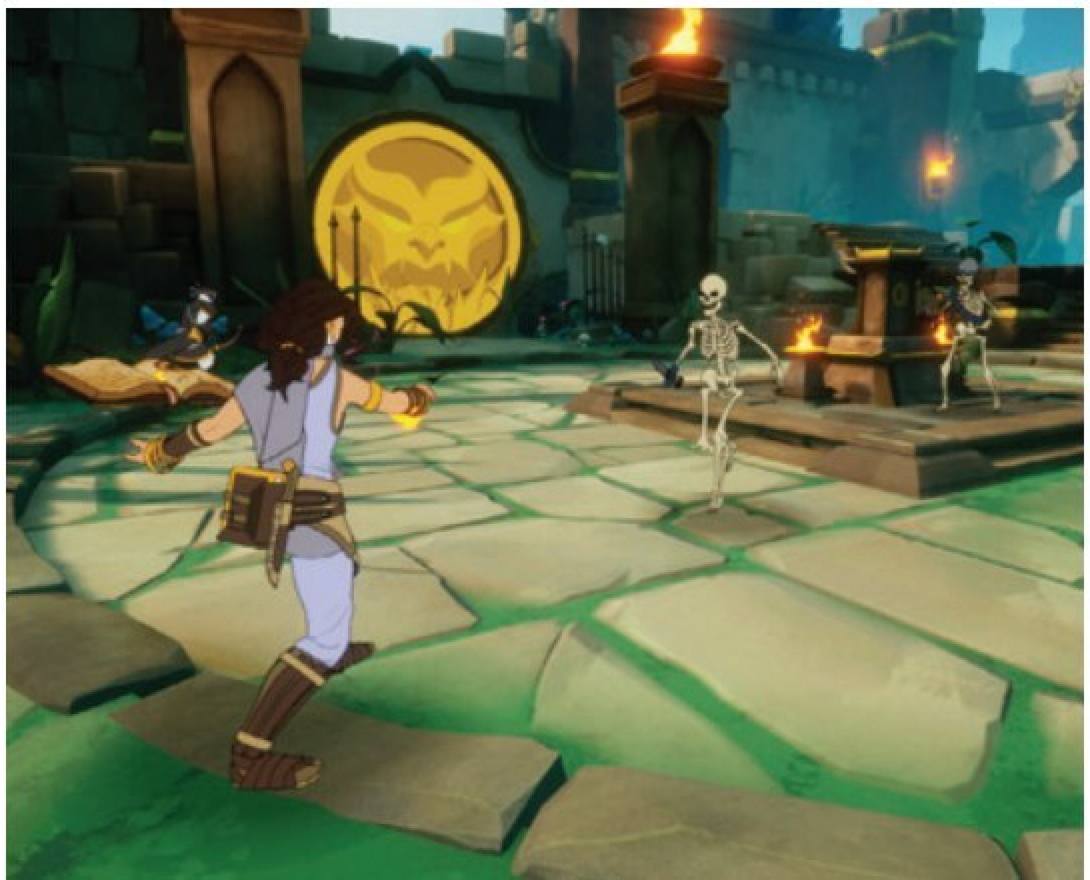
MYTHFORCE

Blast from the past

Revealed just last month and now in Epic Games Early Access, MythForce is the latest project from developer Beamdog. The team, led by former BioWare co-founder Trent Oster, is known for its work on the enhanced editions of the Baldur's Gate franchise. I recently sat down with the developers to delve through MythForce's dungeons, and while the team's D&D pedigree shines through, the upcoming title has a vibe all its own.

The game takes inspiration from Saturday morning cartoons like *He-Man* and *ThunderCats*. After watching the '80s-drenched animated introductory cinematic, I was impressed with how well the developer captured that spirit. Luckily, it's not just the art that's fun. MythForce is a first-person roguelite action game. It offers four heroes to choose from – a knight, rogue, mage, and hunter – then asks you to make your way through a procedurally generated maze of enemy-filled levels, picking up loot and grabbing increasingly powerful weapons as you go. You can play in a single-player mode, but Beamdog emphasizes how much better the experience is with friends. So for my preview, three of the developers jumped into the fray with me.

I ran through the demo as Hawkins, a skilled bowman whose special abilities include temporary invisibility, creating a void to draw in foes, and launching a wildly powerful shot at all enemies in his path. Almost immediately, I nearly murdered a teammate. The first room in the demo's dungeon contained a bulbous red plant, which I thoughtlessly shot to see what would happen. It exploded. I took out a few skeletal enemies in the blast, but this early misstep quickly taught me that the encroaching minions weren't the game's only threats. Traps that spew fire, pools of acid, and other devious features are ready for the unwary adventurer.



While differing slightly from the opening, MythForce's hand-drawn aesthetic makes for an animated world laden with larger-than-life baddies, painterly environments, and glimmering loot. Treasure fills every room, ranging from gold to impressive gear. I started with a basic bow but eventually discovered a legendary sword that did elemental damage, leading me to switch to close-range fighting. Not long after, I picked up a spellbook and discarded my blade to rain fire down on my enemies. I constantly changed up my playstyle, which was great for keeping the roguelike adventure fresh run after run. I could pick up defeated enemy weapons, but there were also places to exchange gold for more powerful gear or boons, and that offered an excellent incentive to explore each area for any scrap of wealth I could find.

True to the genre, once my team went down, I had to start back at the beginning of the dungeon. But, some progress I made remained. I leveled up a few times on my first run with Hawkins, and whenever I reached a new milestone, I boosted my stats. I also earned a perk to help with my current run, which included much-needed healing to doing more damage with fire attacks. These perks disappear when you die, but the game over screen tallies experience points to boost your character permanently. I also unlocked an equipable artifact called Invigorating Tonic in the heroes' starting menu that grants a sizeable chunk of stamina on subsequent playthroughs.

MythForce may not be a life-stopping epic, but it does seem like a fun excuse to hang out with friends while playing the hero in a nostalgic world. The developers jokingly referred to it as the game you would play in-between Elden Ring, and I'm inclined to agree. From what I saw, MythForce is a game that winks through its fanciful, bygone packaging to offer players a lighthearted yet satisfying experience. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (1 to 4-Players Online) **PUBLISHER** Aspyr Media **DEVELOPER** Beamdog **RELEASE** TBA (Epic Early Access April 20)

VALKYRIE ELYSIUM

Valkyrie Profile makes its long-awaited comeback

For years now, the Valkyrie Profile series has largely sat dormant, much to the chagrin of its passionate fanbase. Beyond a mobile entry in 2016, the last mainline game, Valkyrie Profile: Covenant of the Plume, hit Nintendo DS back in 2009. But dreams came true during the recent PlayStation State of Play, thanks to the reveal of Valkyrie Elysium. This new chapter in the cult-favorite role-playing franchise resurrects the series and modernizes it with an action-oriented flair.

The reveal trailer introduced Elysium's protagonist, a currently unnamed Valkyrie. If you're new to the franchise, its fiction is steeped in Norse mythology. For this adventure, the All-Father tasks our Valkyrie hero with preventing the world's destruction by way of Ragnarok. Publisher Square Enix is keeping a tight lid on story details, but we know that the Valkyrie won't shoulder this burden alone. A party of allies assist in her quest.

Valkyrie Profile's combat has traditionally been turn-based; its signature feature is having party members assigned to individual face buttons. Elysium is more of a fast-paced action/RPG. The reveal trailer shows off the Valkyrie's slick moves as she gracefully slices through enemies using a lightning-imbued sword. She's quick on her feet, zipping across arenas to close the gap on attackers or impale them with a deadly sword thrust. Square Enix says a variety of weapons will be at the player's disposal, and the Valkryie can utilize magic attacks such as electrocuting foes with lighting bolts or setting them ablaze with fireballs.

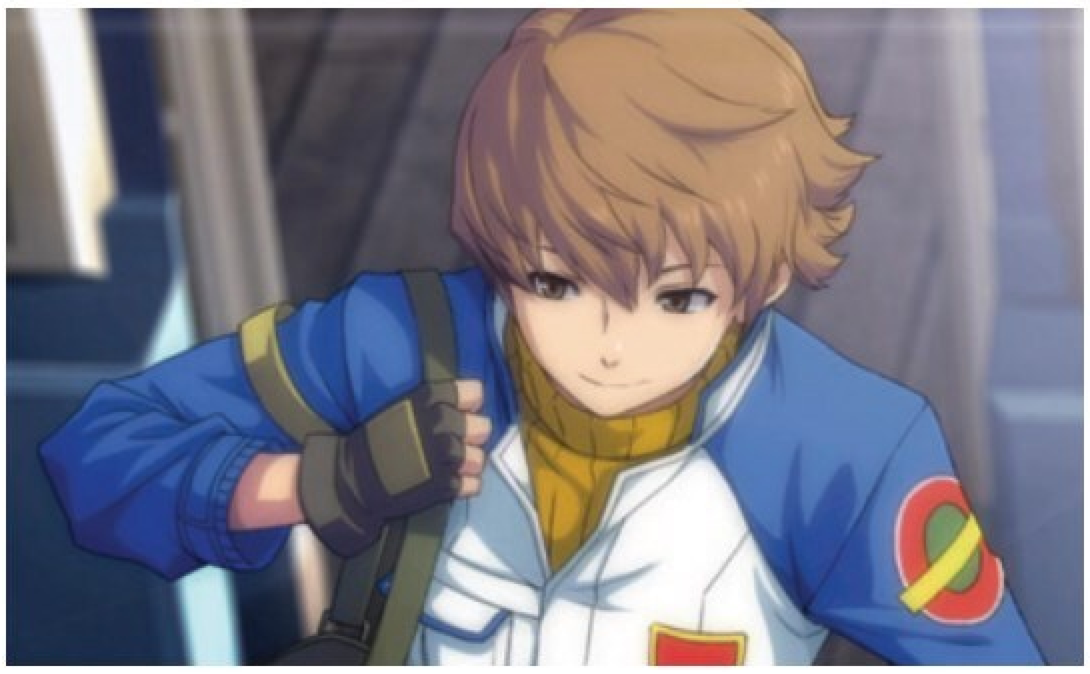
Allies battle alongside the Valkyrie, but it's unclear if players control them directly or if they're purely A.I.-driven. In one scene, the Valkyrie seemingly absorbs her companion into her own being, suggesting partners are spawned from within her. Combat may be action-oriented but Square states it will feature reimagined takes on classic mechanics such as finishing moves and combo systems. Platforming-heavy exploration has also been a recurring trait for the series, which seems to remain the case in Elysium. We saw the Valkyrie use a grapple line to hook structures and soar across environments.

Although this is a dramatic shift for the franchise, one familiar element remains intact. Long-time series composer Motoi Sakuraba returns to helm the soundtrack, giving Elysium a sound that harkens back to Valkyrie Profile's roots. We still have many questions about Valkyrie Elysium, but Square is keeping additional information close to the chest until a later date. We can't wait to learn more about this reinvention of this beloved series and look forward to diving in when Valkyrie Elysium launches on PlayStation consoles and PC later this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Soleil Ltd. **RELEASE** 2022

THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS FROM ZERO

The lost Crossbell arc



Nihon Falcom's Trails series is a web of connecting storylines and recurring characters spanning several games, very much like the Marvel cinematic universe. Fans following the Trails in the Sky and Cold Steel arcs revel in being reunited with familiar faces, discovering related threads, and seeing how Falcom weaves everything together. Unfortunately, North American fans have one blind spot: the spin-off Crossbell arc, which includes Trails from Zero and Trails to Azure. Both games occur after Trails in the Sky the 3rd and are finally coming to North America. Trails from Zero, which initially launched over a decade ago on PSP, is the first in the duology.

Political intrigue is a significant element of the Trails' plot, which has been rife with power struggles, corruption, and warfare. Trails from Zero takes place in Crossbell, a prosperous city-state resting between two powerful domains, the Erebonian Empire and the Calvard Republic. Both are vying for control and have very different visions for Crossbell's future. Those who played the Cold Steel games should already be intimately familiar with Crossbell, as it's been referenced many times, as party member Juna's hometown, and becomes a key destination in the journey.

Trails from Zero follows Lloyd Bannings, who gets more than he bargained for when he joins the Crossbell Police as a rookie detective, only to find a dark criminal underbelly and many more terrible secrets hidden beneath the surface. Lloyd gets put on the force's Special Support Section, which performs odd jobs to help those in need. It seems like a noble cause, but the unit is viewed more as a joke than a vital component in keeping Crossbell safe.

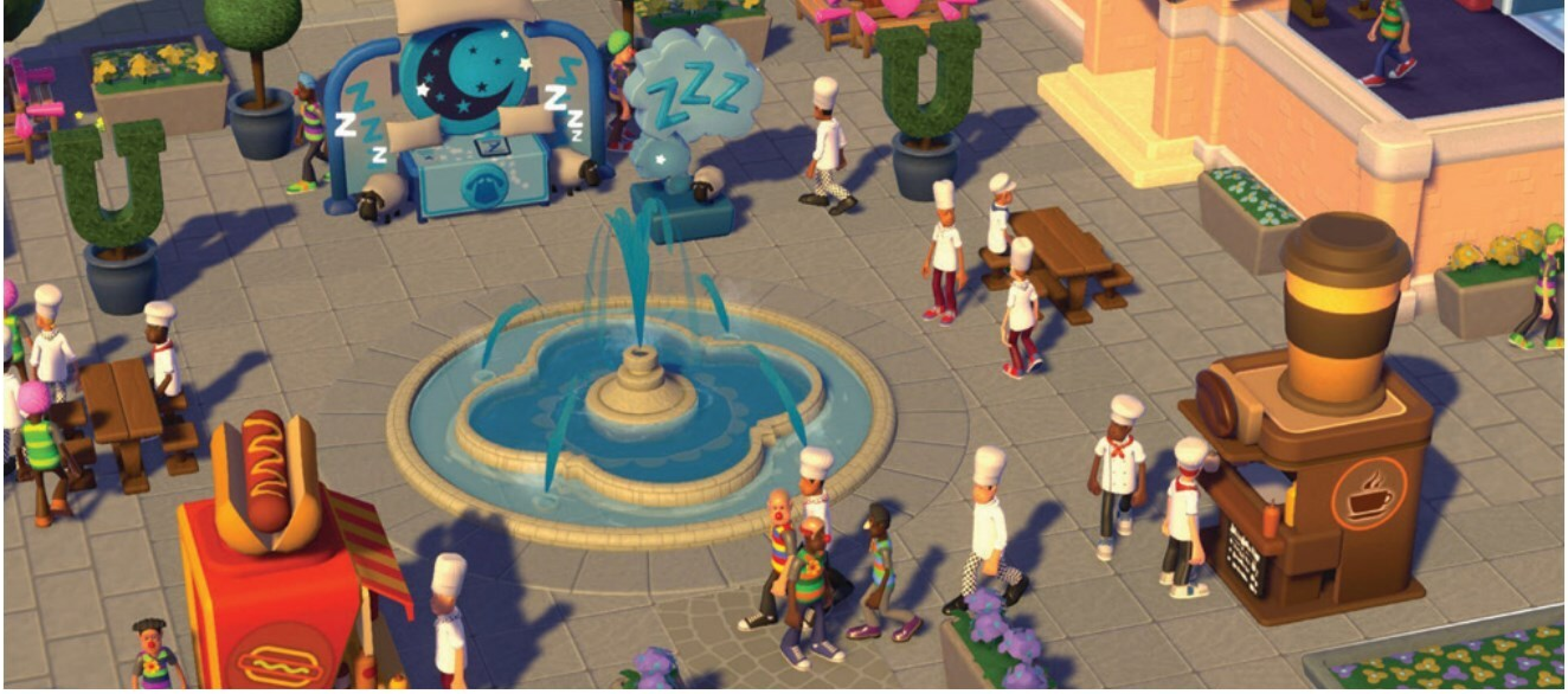
Lloyd and his colleagues, such as the playful Elie MacDowell and the reserved Tio Plato, should be recognizable to Cold Steel fans. Tio's traumatizing past gets explored in Zero, forcing her to confront her dark childhood head-on. However, the most recognizable character is Randy Orlando, an ex-soldier, who has a big role in later Cold Steel games, as he becomes an instructor at Thors Branch Campus and integral to later plot developments.

Trails from Zero houses the same traditional Trails gameplay we've come to expect, with a focus on exploration, detailed dialogue, and turn-based combat full of over-the-top specials and powerful magical attacks. This version also includes high-speed and skip modes to help you get through battles quicker. In addition, NIS America also partnered with Geofront, which created a heralded Trails from Zero English fan translation in 2020, for this official version.

Trails from Zero looks like a must-play for fans wanting to learn more about the characters and lore of this fascinating world. I'm excited to finally experience what happens with the Crossbell arc, as I've always felt I missed out on connecting more with certain characters and plot points. The next part of the two-story arc, Trails to Azure, debuts sometime next year along with Trails into Reverie, which acts as an epilogue to the Crossbell and Cold Steel arcs. That's a lot of Trails in the future, and I'm not complaining.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

PLATFORM PS4 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** NIS America
DEVELOPER Nihon Falcom **RELEASE** September 27



TWO POINT CAMPUS

Showing promising strides in and out of the classroom

Two Point Studios proved it could tap into the engaging and wacky side of simulation games with its debut title, Two Point Hospital. After tackling the healthcare system, the team is ready for a new challenge: education. Thankfully, Two Point Studios is keeping its satiric, over-the-top approach and doubling down for Two Point Campus. I recently went hands-on with the game, where you can build the college experience of your wildest dreams, and I chatted with the team about its vision.

As a simulation game, Two Point Campus allows you to create universities and manage their success. This task puts you in charge of many aspects, from maintaining the budget to ensuring students' happiness to even deciding on the curriculum. The latter lets you offer courses in essential subjects, such as knighthood, gastronomy (cooking), and archaeology. Everything comes with a silly factor that makes watching students engage with the material fun. For instance, you can display the amusing and weird things your archeology students find around campus. Knight school depicts students jousting and contending with fire-breathing dragons, while a culinary-focused lecture shows larger-than-life cheeseburgers and pizzas being made.

One thing that stood out from my hands-on time is how many more items you have compared to Two Point Hospital, especially from the onset. I immediately felt like I could design a unique campus, setting up arcade machines and various food stands to form a common area. I imagined creating a good atmosphere for socializing and studying by placing benches and fountains outside. Everything you do feeds back into the students and their success, from adding more cubbies in the library to offering private lessons. The higher your students' grades, the more likely you'll build up enrollment. However, what I liked best was how Two Point Studios didn't neglect the social aspect of college. You can throw mixers, hold contests, and even offer extracurricular activities. Yes, there's a napping club.

"Anyone who's been to university or college, they might one day say, 'I had a really amazing lecture,' but the things they [often] remember are the great parties and the relationships they had," says studio director Mark Webley. "It is a formative part of one's life. So, if [the player] can create an environment where people can make friends, and even fall in love, then it can lift their spirits. A student having a strong relationship with other people or multiple people is important."

In a way, you're helping the students build these relationships depending on the items or events in which you invest. Maybe you buy a "love fountain" to put that romantic feeling in the air or use a lecture hall to project a movie for people to bond over. That option also made the people-watching element of the game a lot more fun for me, as the animators upped the emoting, so I knew exactly how students were feeling and if they were becoming interested in one another. I saw everything from students sighing through a lecture to excitedly button-mashing on arcade machines. Professors may also start doing the robot to see if anyone's paying attention.

So far, it looks like Two Point Campus is taking steps in a positive direction and building wonderfully off its predecessor. You have far more options in your hands, but it's also not done in an overwhelming way. If anything, I felt more invested in the experience now that I must focus more on the people who enter what I build. It's a long-term investment in their futures.

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Sega Europe
DEVELOPER Two Point Studios **RELEASE** August 9

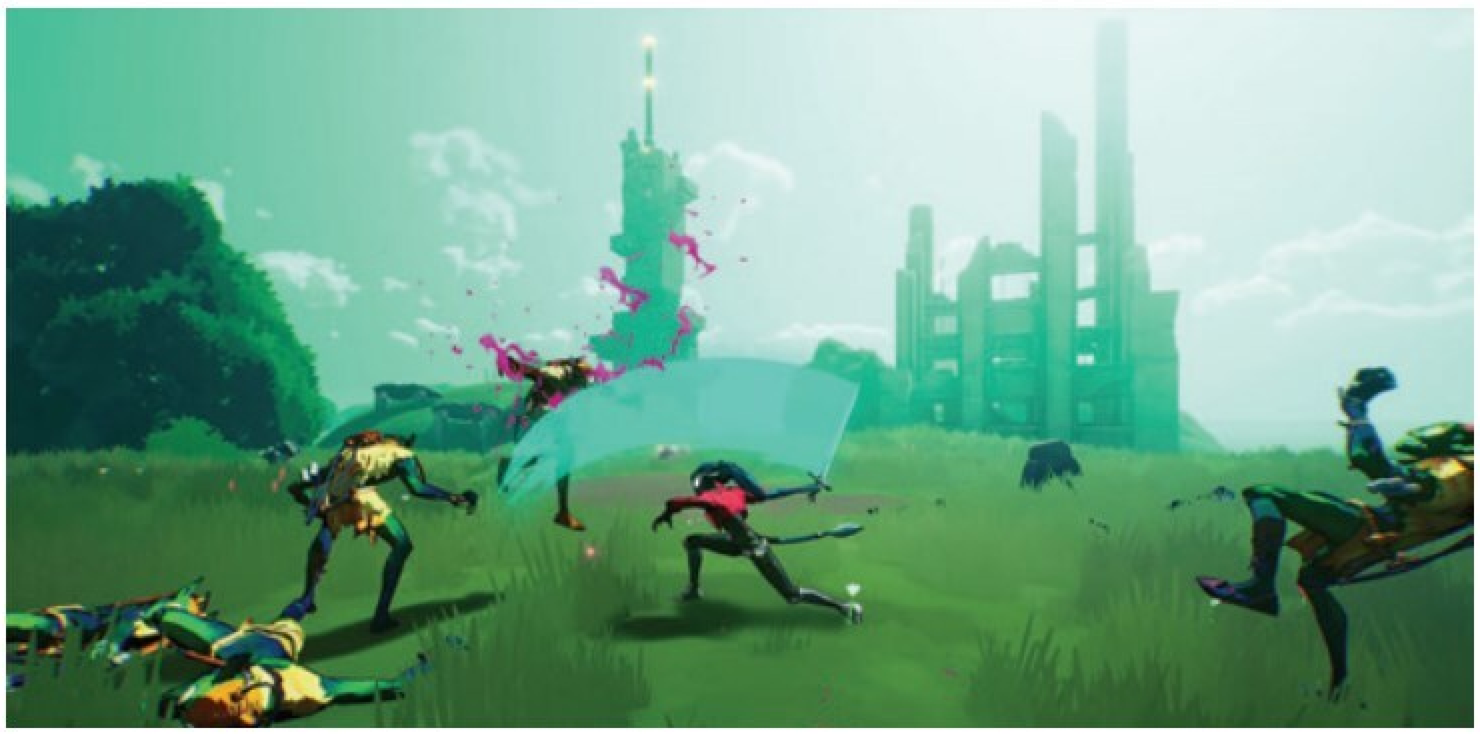
HYPER LIGHT BREAKER

Same light, more players

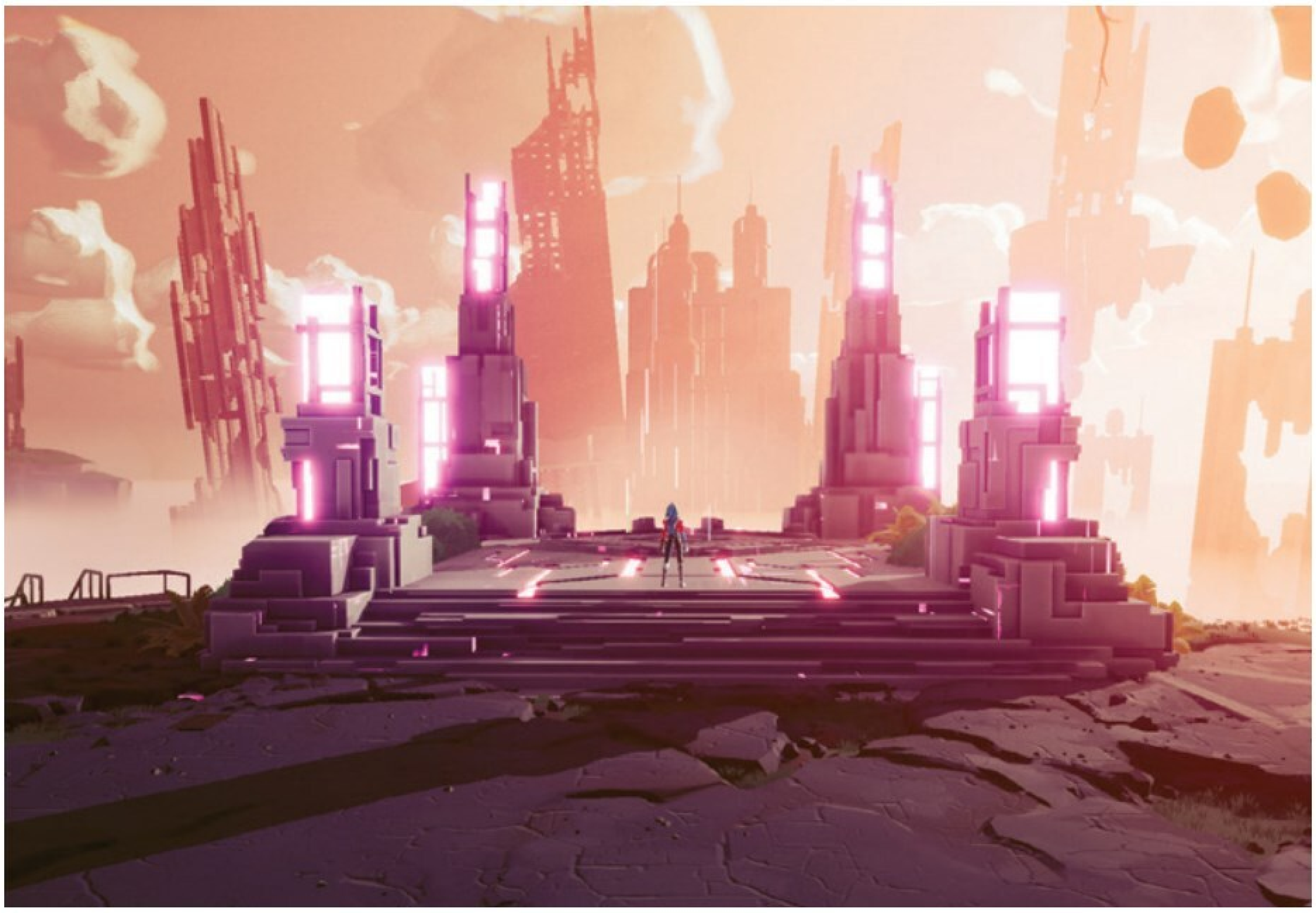
A stylishly animated trailer was our first hint that Heart Machine is crafting a follow-up to Hyper Light Drifter. Six years after engaging players with its blazing fast combat and unusual world, the studio is unveiling a new adventure, inviting returning players and their friends to join in on the fun. Hyper Light Breaker takes players to a world called the Overgrowth and along a path to bring down the threat of the Abyss King – a mission players can take on single-handedly or as a team.

"Multiplayer changes everything in a lot of ways," says creative director Alx Preston. "It makes us reconsider how to tell a story because there might be one player or four players or anything in between, so it can't be the same structure as you would have in a single-player game." Heart Machine is building Hyper Light Breaker's story around the online cooperative multiplayer experience in addition to the solo-style play the developer focused on in prior games. "Multiplayer ultimately alters how we will present the story to account for the variability that wasn't there before in a single-player game," Preston continues. "It's a major consideration in how we tell our story and how we present aspects of the world."

Another big change is how Hyper Light Breaker is built as a roguelite experience, with a settlement that you return to between runs. Meta-progression elements appear as available upgrades and settlers in the hub, who each add additional wrinkles to the narrative. "The rogue-lite elements feed into the story and become the fabric of the world," Preston says. "We wanted to work that type of death cycle into the narrative."



Not long after announcing the project, Heart Machine showed off the game's world map, illuminating the open biomes awaiting players. And while running and dashing remain core components, players should also expect more exciting forms of locomotion. "We have much more open worlds to traverse in, so it's important to have fun modes of transportation to carry you across larger landscapes," Preston says. "Things like the hoverboard and glider will go a long way to make the game feel more engaging during traversal, instead of just holding a button in a direction. We're aiming for more interactivity, buoyancy, and physicality to make things like going up the sides of cliffs simpler."



Even with significant changes to multiplayer and exploration, there's no doubt that Hyper Light Breaker is part of an established fiction. "The story of the world in Drifter carries over, including the core narrative elements and what happened in the world," Preston says. "It's still the same setting. The presence of Hyper Light and the mysteries behind it are still here in the world. You'll get returning species and mention of other lands that relate to content from Drifter, as well as some returning enemies."

I'm thrilled to hear that the talented team at Heart Machine is returning to the beautiful game world established in its first game. Early glimpses suggest a very promising and visually arresting title, but players will have a long wait to see the finished project; even early access isn't planned until sometime in 2023. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Gearbox Publishing **DEVELOPER** Heart Machine **RELEASE** TBA (Early Access Spring 2023)

SONIC ORIGINS

Play the classics

SCORE 500
TIME 0:17
RINGS 28

While fans eagerly wait to learn more about Sonic Frontiers, the next mainline Sonic the Hedgehog game set to launch later this year, Sega is giving fans a chance to relive some of his greatest adventures through the Sonic Origins collection. Announced in 2021, the compilation includes Sonic the Hedgehog, Sonic the Hedgehog 2, Sonic 3 & Knuckles, and Sonic CD in one celebratory bundle. While that initial announcement gave us a taste, we caught up with creative officer and head of Sonic Team, Takashi Iizuka, to learn more about what to expect.

Sonic Origins allows you to relive classic adventures with remastered visuals, new features, and unique modes. When you enter the menu, you're given the option to choose which of the four titles you'd like to play and if you'd prefer to play in Classic Mode or Anniversary Mode. As the name suggests, Classic Mode lets you experience the games in their original 4:3 aspect ratio with limited lives. Meanwhile, Anniversary Mode gives the games a more modern feel by expanding it out to a 16:9 widescreen format and removing lives entirely. Instead, players have a new collectible coins system they can use to unlock never-before-seen animations and illustrations in the game's museum. Players can also tackle Mission Mode, which includes changes to the original stages and even adds completion conditions.

Porting the games without emulators gave Sega more flexibility to experiment. "In previous compilation titles that used emulators, we could only recreate the original games and weren't able to provide game experiences that fit modern gaming environments," Iizuka says. "But since we're able to make changes to the games themselves in Sonic Origins, we support 16:9 widescreen, and we're rebuilding them with specs that make it easier for beginners to play."

Another critical feature of Sonic Origins is it allows you to play as Sonic, Tails, or Knuckles in Sonic 1. While Knuckles has been playable in Sonic 2 and Sonic 3 for nearly 30 years using Sonic & Knuckles' Lock-On Technology, his appearance in Sonic 1 has been rarer in official releases. "Knuckles can climb walls and glide, and those special abilities can't be used to their full potential in [the original] Sonic 1 because it was designed for Sonic alone," Iizuka says. "But the Sonic 1 included in Sonic Origins is based on the version ported for mobile, and the level design has been readjusted so Knuckles can climb walls and glide. People who have only played the original Sonic 1 might discover new things if they try playing with Knuckles."

Sega also wanted the compilation to feel more like one massive story, so it included new cutscenes to add story context. "We've created new animations to link the four games together with story episodes, so players can enjoy them as one epic story mode," Iizuka says. "Tails and Sonic meeting for the first time, Eggman and Knuckles meeting for the first time, and other scenes that haven't been portrayed before are shown in the animations. We also have multiple new elements for hardcore fans who have already played the original games over and over."

While the games housed in the Sonic Origins bundle have been re-released more times than we can count, it's exciting to see Sonic Team and Sega putting out what they hope will be the definitive versions of these games. Hopefully, they're right, and we get a great reminder of why we fell in love with Sega's blue hedgehog in the first place. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Sega **DEVELOPER** Sega, Headcannon **RELEASE** June 23

DIABLO IMMORTAL

Looting Hell, on the go

On its surface, Diablo Immortal looks like a traditional Diablo game. Demons are everywhere, flashy animations accompany your skeleton-crushing moves, and the gothic architecture screams, "You're in Sanctuary." However, upon deeper inspection, a lot is new in Diablo Immortal, which was developed from the ground up for mobile devices. While Diablo Immortal is also coming to PC in Open Beta on June 2, the same day the full game launches on iOS and Android in most regions, you shouldn't expect a conventional Diablo experience.

The head of the Diablo franchise, Rod Fergusson, recently told us that the PC version of Diablo Immortal is a port, through and through. The UI is clearly designed for mobile devices, with the same optional in-game purchases you can make on your phone. Because the game has crossplay, a Sanctuary is filled with both PC and mobile players. Diablo Immortal game director Wyatt Cheng says he's especially excited about the game's cross-progression, citing numerous times he's ended a session on PC only to walk out the door and pick right back up where he left off on his phone.

I haven't gone hands-on with Diablo Immortal, but after speaking with both Fergusson and Cheng for nearly an hour about the game, I'm more excited than I ever thought I'd be after its 2018 announcement. As a huge fan of Diablo II, and someone who put their fair share of time into Diablo III, the idea that Immortal is going to bridge the end of II and the start of III is especially exciting. It also positions itself as a game that can bring back beloved, not-yet-dead characters like Deckard Cain of Diablo II.

As for the title itself, it's still a Diablo game at its core, just slightly different. It features the same gothic environments and the usual cast of demonic enemies and bosses. The game also boasts six familiar, playable classes – Barbarian, Crusader, Demon Hunter, Monk, Necromancer, and Wizard – with in-game options to change classes if you wish. At the heart of the Diablo series is a crunchy, blood-filled combat system that must stay intriguing because combat system – 95% of any Diablo experience. That remains the case with Immortal, but new systems, such as a deeper Paragon Level mechanic, endgame Rifts, which are dungeons that can be further randomized with Crests, and the series' first-ever PvP, are aiming to keep players engaged beyond the base story.

The PvP, called the Cycle of Strife, is something I'm particularly excited about because it fuses Immortals' heavy social-play systems with a brand-new experience for the franchise. In Cycle of Strife, the Immortals serve to protect Sanctuary, and the Shadows faction challenges the Immortals. When confronted, the Immortals must fend off the Shadows in a PvP battle; however, things get especially interesting when the top Immortal player must defeat 30 Shadows players to retain the Eternal Crown title. If they lose it, the 30 Shadows players must then fight, battle-royale style, to take the title for themselves, converting to an Immortal in the process.

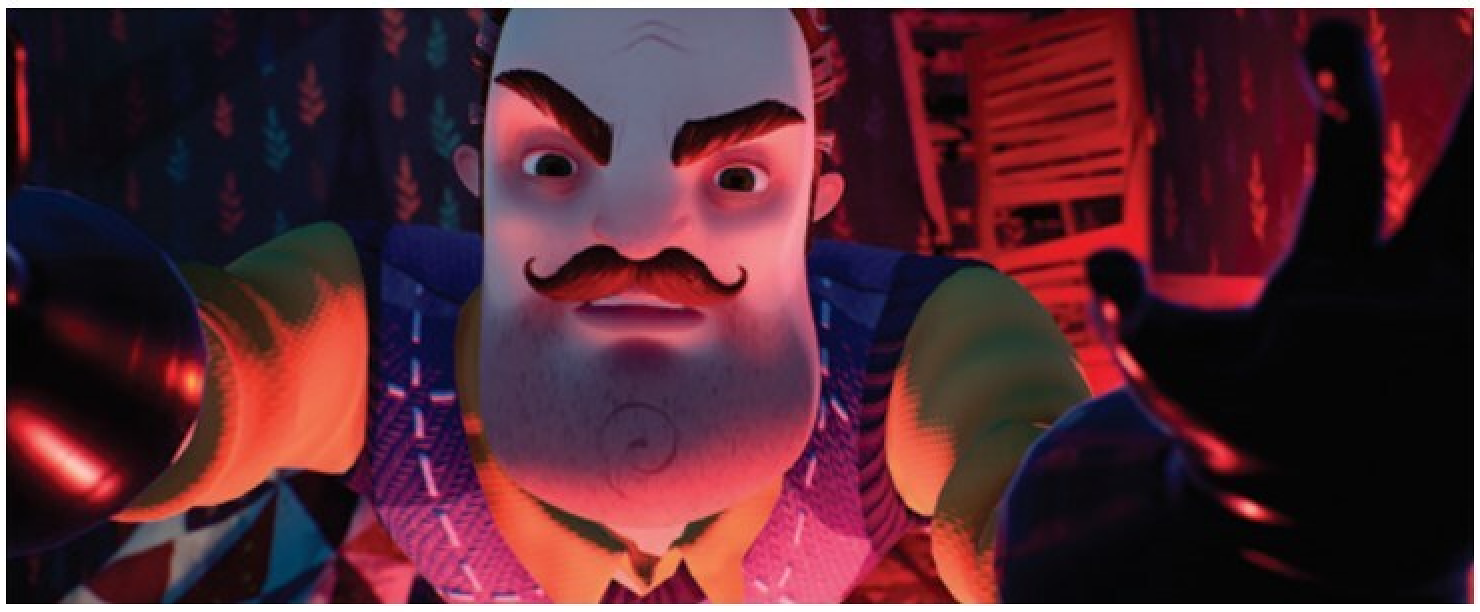
Couple Cycle of Strife with other systems, like Helliquary raids – a seemingly expansive endgame – loot galore, and customization that Cheng says is the deepest in any Diablo game ever, and I'm rearing to fight back against the hordes of Hell this June. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM iOS • Android • PC **STYLE** Massively Multiplayer Online Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Activision Blizzard
DEVELOPER Blizzard Entertainment, Netease
RELEASE June 2

822
237
1.1K
822
Wizard
1.1K

HELLO NEIGHBOR 2

Don’t love thy neighbor



Hello Neighbor 2 is the follow-up to 2017’s Hello Neighbor, which itself became a bit of a cult hit due to its popularity in streaming and on YouTube. The sequel is clearly looking to up the ante, expanding on the neighbor-dodging stealth at the heart of the first game by adding more enemies to avoid, houses and businesses to explore, and tools to your arsenal. After playing through the beta, I’m still not sure all of that is enough to really pull me in when it’s released later this year because, simply put, it did little to wow me. That said, it’s clear that tinyBuild and Eerie Guest have worked hard to make it perform, play, and look better than the first and I’m at least curious to see what the final build looks like in December.

Developer tinyBuild has promised the Hello Neighbor 2 beta is spoiler-free so it is unlikely its puzzles will end up in the final game. In the beta, you play a journalist looking into cases of missing children. Each of these cases represents a small selection of puzzles acquainting you with the inhabitants of Raven Brooks. And this time, it’s not just the titular neighbor stalking you, hoping to thwart your plans, but others throughout the town as well.

After a short opening sequence, you’re free to roam around town, but only to a point. With three cases of missing children to solve, it’s clear that’s where the beta wants your focus, and it wants you to do so in a specific order.

The first case requires you to sneak into a house. If the police officer inside spots you, an awkward animation plays – which is hopefully polished up before the final release – showing him grabbing you before the game returns you to the front of the house. In order to get past him, you need to sneakily snatch his keys, open the door to his police vehicle, and turn on the siren to distract him. Once distracted, you can head inside to explore the basement, which ultimately leads to solving one case.

Without spoiling the other scenarios in the beta, that’s essentially how each goes. There’s a person, or sometimes a dog, whose gaze you must avoid so you can grab an item that will help you progress forward. And don’t worry, if you’re hoping to see the game’s namesake, he’s very much in the beta.

Beyond that, there’s not much more to this beta unless you simply want to explore the area. I think my biggest hang-up with the project is that it’s not doing anything different, unique, or special for the stealth-action genre.

Despite the lackluster moment-to-moment action, I really did enjoy the beta’s visual style. It’s colorful and unique and carries an almost Tim Burton-esque quality of design with it. I like the world and darker tone of the narrative that contrasts quite nicely with its more whimsical art style, but I’m left wanting more from the gameplay. The team still has nearly eight months of development time before the game is in players’ hands; tinyBuild’s made it clear this early look is missing some gameplay features that will be present in the final release. Hello Neighbor 2’s beta hasn’t sold me on the experience, but much can change in the lead-up to launch.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** tinyBuild
DEVELOPER Eerie Guest, tinyBuild **RELEASE** December 6

WRESTLEQUEST

World wrestling role-playing

Pro wrestling video games have been almost exclusively fighting games designed to emulate the real thing. WrestleQuest escapes that pigeonhole by translating the wild antics of sports entertainment into a classic role-playing experience sharing more in common with games like Chrono Trigger and Final Fantasy VI than WWE 2K.

Entering the ring is protagonist Randy Santos AKA Muchacho Man. He's an upstart luchador and passionate wrestling fan who, as you may have guessed, fashioned himself after his idol: the legendary Randy "Macho Man" Savage. Santos' love for wrestling is so pure that he treats it as a real sport instead of a scripted drama (no matter how many people tell him otherwise).

On his road to stardom, he explores a colorful overworld divided into various federations themed after the many flavors of wrestling. For example, one zone represents the weapon-centric hardcore style of ECW while another promotes Japanese Puroresu and even Sumo. The WWE equivalent is the biggest of them all, and its owner is the game's main villain, slowly capturing the other territories. The dungeon-laden world resembles a childhood wrestling playset and features clever platforming mechanics such as slingshotting off ring posts to leap over gaps.

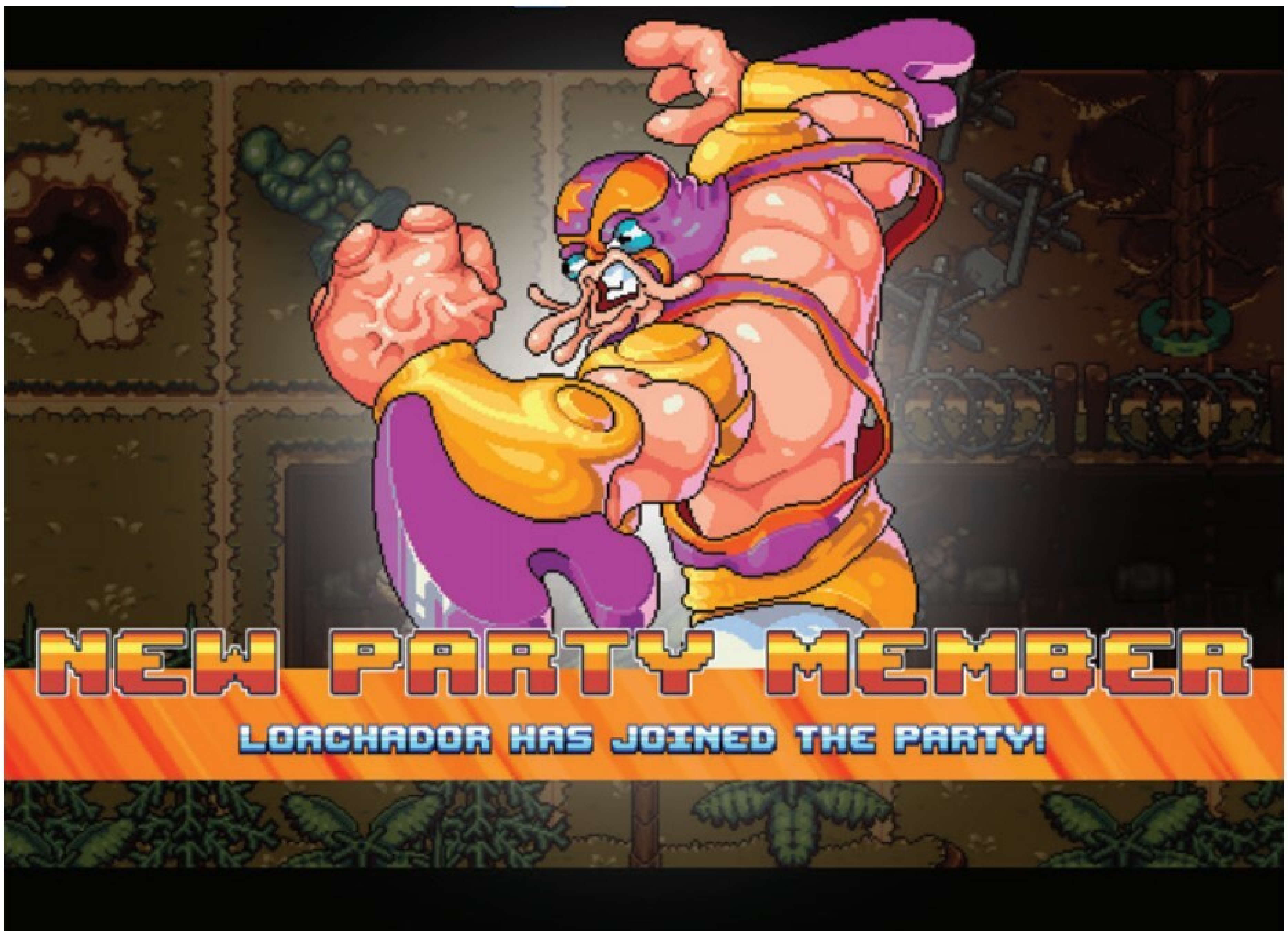
For wrestling enthusiasts, WrestleQuest overflows with cameos, references, and deep-cut nods. Some of the real-life stars you'll spot include Andre the Giant, Jake "The Snake" Roberts, and Jeff Jarrett. Even podcast host Conrad Thompson commentates on your adventure. The fictional personalities look just as entertaining and are humorously strange, such as fish-themed Loachador and the antler-rocking Stag Logan. Developer Mega Cat says you don't need to know a hammerlock from a wristlock to enjoy WrestleQuest and hopes its fun presentation and gameplay ropes in all RPG fans.

Speaking of which, the game "wrestlefies" its RPG roots. Hype Types act as classes with wrestlers assuming roles such as Powerhouse, High-Flyer, or Technician. Each class sports its own playstyle; Technicians rely on hitting timed button presses and applying debuffs, for example. You're free to assemble a stable of different Hype Types, and wrestlers can take on any role as needed, providing strategic flexibility in team-building.

Turn-based battles unfold in the squared circle and incorporate the most important element of wrestling: the audience. Keeping fans engaged is communicated via a Hype Meter indicating how excited or bored viewers are with your fight. Regularly mixing up your attacks gets the people on your side, encouraging you to utilize your entire arsenal. A happy crowd rewards you with helpful buffs and better loot and materials to craft weapons and gear. Boring the audience swings the Hype Meter in favor of your opponents, which makes them tougher to beat. Weakening foes allows you to perform powerful finishing moves that can score an instant KO. Alternatively, you can also win a pinfall mini-game to triumph over certain enemy types. Adversaries can also pin players when their HP hits zero, with kick-outs restoring a portion of health to fuel a comeback.

Expect to take on a stable of bosses whose matches sport unique stipulations to make them feel like main event bouts. Prior to challenging these top stars, you engage in a war of words via promo battles. With a microphone in hand, selecting the best insult from a pool of responses earns crowd support and fills the Hype Meter in your favor at the start of the fight.

Developer Mega Cat's love of pro wrestling shines in WrestleQuest. The team incorporated input from current and former stars and even created its own in-game wrestling jargon ("Slam Junkees" instead of "Marks"). You can take Muchacho Man to championship gold later this year when WrestleQuest comes to PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Skybound Games **DEVELOPER** Mega Cat Studios **RELEASE** 2022

XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 3

Adding new armor to the core

We often see games delayed from their initial release windows, but Nintendo gave Xenoblade fans a pleasant surprise when it moved Xenoblade Chronicles 3's launch up from September to July 29. The new entry, which has a central theme of life, promises to connect the futures of the previous two games. A new trailer also showcased what's next for one of the top RPG franchises around.

Xenoblade Chronicles 3 stars dual protagonists Noah and Mio, who are from the opposing nations of Keves and Agnus, respectively. During their journey, they join up with six other characters from these nations, who all have one thing in common: Their homelands have mysteriously turned against them. The trailer shows Noah and company being called monsters with forces chasing after them. They plead their innocence but are clearly viewed as a sinister threat.

Big explosions, huge mech-like beings, and flashy setpieces give way to our first big look at gameplay. Like previous games, you face enemies directly in the overworld, and each party member has their own battle role around which to form strategies. For example, Swordfighter Noah specializes in close-range attacks, while Zephyr Mio is highly evasive, drawing the enemy's attention and dodging in the nick of time. You can change characters' classes to customize your party as you wish as you progress.

New is the Interlock System, where if you meet certain conditions, specific pairs, such as Noah and Mio, can combine into a giant form called Ouroboros. Each Ouroboros has a unique design and abilities, and their existence appears tied to the plot. Deciding when to transform is also key to a successful strategy.

The enemy and Ouroboros designs make me excited to get back on the battlefield. As the trailer hinted, "It's a wild ride, this 'passage of fate.'"

BY KIMBERLEY WALLACE

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Monolith Soft
RELEASE July 29

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TANDEM
A TALE OF SHADOWS
RAINBOW BILLY
THE CURSE OF THE LEVIATHAN
EASTWARD
6 Games in 1
Hidden Objects Collection
Volume 2
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E-M
ESRB esrb.org

SAINTS ROW

Volition finally pulled back the curtains on the customization elements in its upcoming Saints Row reboot. Deep character customization has been a mainstay since the first game, but this new title takes everything to the next level with robust options for your clothing, vehicles, weapons, headquarters, and even gang members. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Volition **RELEASE** August 23

GUN JAM

In this hectic FPS, rhythm is your life. Shooting baddies and dashing around the delightfully colorful levels require precise timing. Like many rhythm games, players see a prompt constantly scrolling down the middle of the screen, which they must match to make shots count. The art and music are vibrant, and the game aims to just feel fun. **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Rhythm/Shooter
PUBLISHER Raw Fury **DEVELOPER** Jaw Drop Games **RELEASE** TBA

SUPERFUSE

With enough skill trees to ensure your customized Enforcer plays precisely the way you want, Superfuse stitches together frantic action with a comic book-inspired story. Humanity has long abandoned Earth and the wealthy control everything. They funded science advancements, giving themselves everlasting life and you superpowers to fight horrifying monsters called "the corruption." **BY JILL GRODT**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Role-Playing (4-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Raw Fury **DEVELOPER** Stitch Heads Entertainment **RELEASE** 2023

THE CONSTELLATION SPACEFARER'S GUIDE
OMEGA
DON USE

STARFIELD

We know very little about Starfield other than it's a Bethesda Game Studios title set in space. And that you'll have a fun little robot companion named Vasco. Shown in a recent trailer, Vasco will help you with exploration and perhaps, should the need arise, even combat. Starfield is slated for a 2023 release.

BY BLAKE HESTER

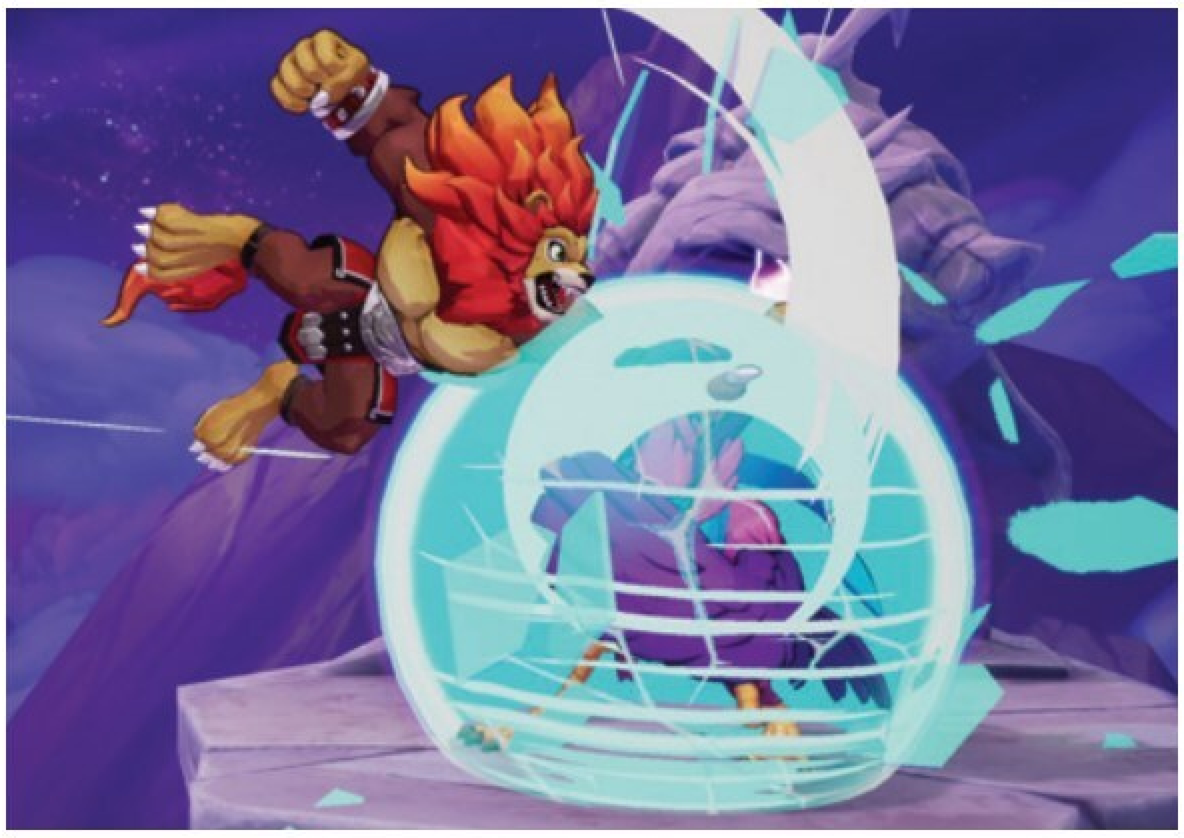
PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Bethesda Softworks **DEVELOPER** Bethesda Game Studios **RELEASE** 2023

THE DARK PICTURES ANTHOLOGY: THE DEVIL IN ME

The Devil In Me is the season finale for The Dark Pictures Anthology. It follows a documentary crew exploring a replica of H. H. Holmes' infamous "Murder Castle" only to find themselves hunted by a mysterious killer. Actress Jessie Buckley stars as protagonist Kate Wilder, and fans can hopefully survive new choice-driven scares later this year. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure (Online TBD)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Supermassive Games **RELEASE** TBA

RIVALS 2

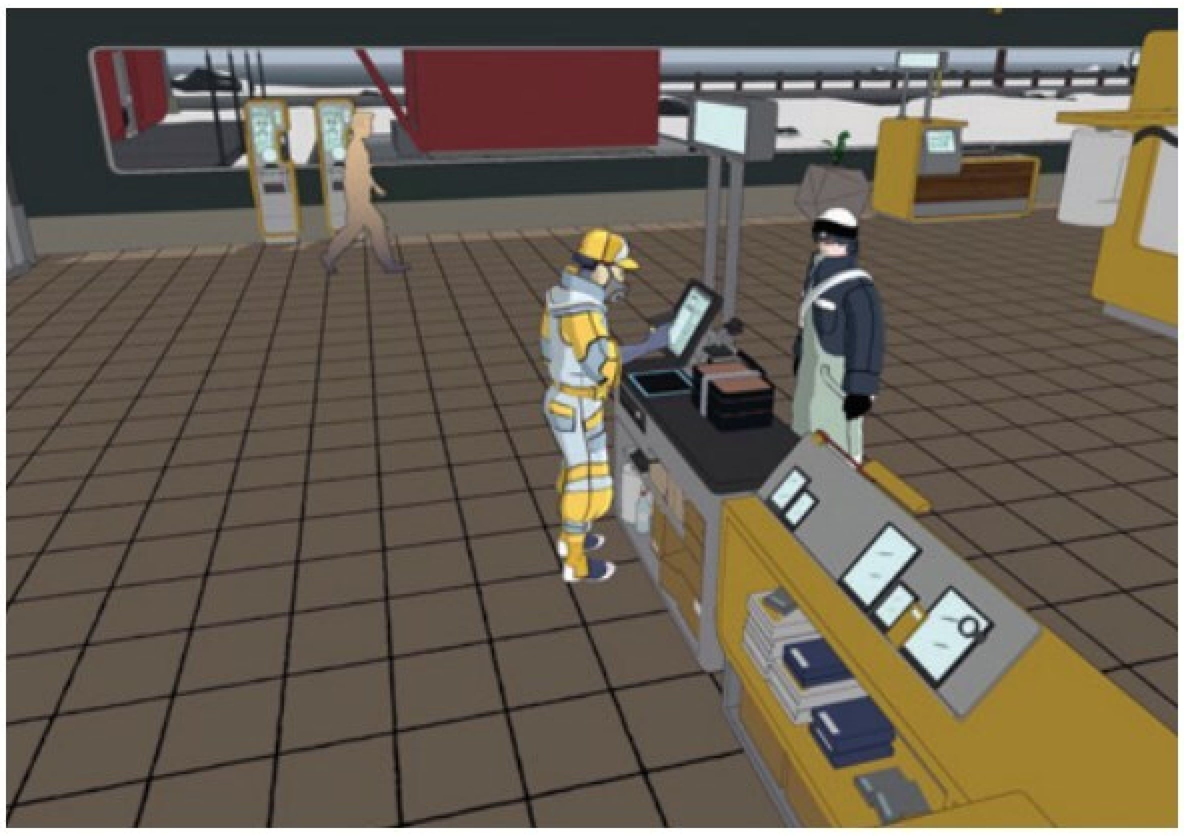


Rivals 2 breaks free of Rivals of Aether's 8-bit visuals and promises a more robust platform fighter. New mechanics include shielding, throwing, and ledge grabbing, bringing the series up to speed with other games in the genre. So far, elemental fighters Zetterburn, Wrastor, and Ranno all make their exciting roster returns. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Fighting **PUBLISHER** Aether Studios
DEVELOPER Aether Studios **RELEASE** 2024

FLAT EYE

Flat Eye's management sim premise belies its deeper, unnerving narrative. As a gas station employee, you begin with stocking shelves and ringing up customers. But as the story grows, so too does your retail operation – and the invasiveness of its technology. While commenting on in-game incidents, Flat Eye eerily echoes technology's real-world anxieties. **BY JILL GRODT**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Raw Fury **DEVELOPER** Monkey Moon **RELEASE** 2022

WARHAMMER 40,000: DARKTIDE

Darktide builds upon the cooperative fun of the Vermintide series but moves the action from fantasy to sci-fi. Up to four players work together to mow down waves of baddies with powerful firearms and melee attacks. Warhammer 40,000: Darktide aims to remind players that the friends who slay together stay together when it launches on September 13. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER Fatshark **DEVELOPER** Fatshark **RELEASE** September 13

WORLD OF WARCRAFT: DRAGONFLIGHT

The long-running MMO has a new expansion on the way, and the watchword is most definitely dragons. Players visit the long-rumored Dragon Isles, explore a new dragon riding system, and may try out a newly playable class/race combo called the Dracthyr Evoker (basically a humanoid dragon). Taken together, the new adventure promises plenty of fun with those most popular of fantasy creatures. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Activision Blizzard **DEVELOPER** Blizzard Entertainment **RELEASE** TBA

MY TIME AT SANDROCK

Following up on the success of My Time at Portia, developer Pathea set forth on a sequel. My Time at Sandrock has players build and explore to try to save a desert town from the brink of economic ruin. Sandrock enters Early Access on Steam in May, when players can help shape this new frontier as the game's development progresses. **BY JOHN CARSON**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Pathea Games, PM Studios
DEVELOPER Pathea Games **RELEASE** 2023 (Early Access May 26)

RETURN TO MONKEY ISLAND

At one point, series creator Ron Gilbert might have said he'd never make another Monkey Island. Things change, apparently. Return to Monkey Island is the sequel to Secret of Monkey Island and Monkey Island 2: LeChuck's Revenge, developed by a lot of the people who made those original games. Return is planned for a 2022 release. **BY BLAKE HESTER** ■

PLATFORM TBA **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Terrible Toybox **RELEASE** 2022

Reviews

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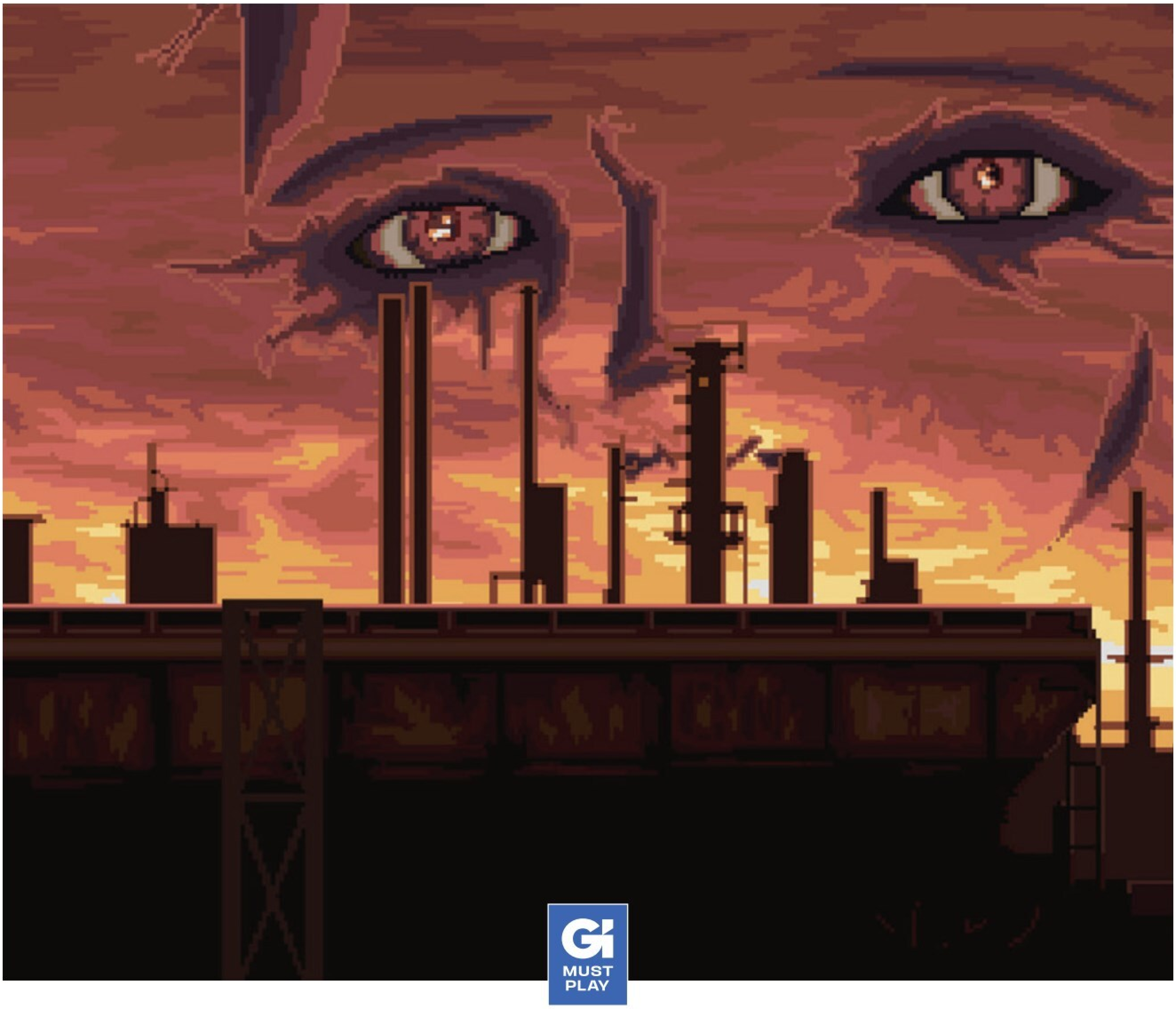
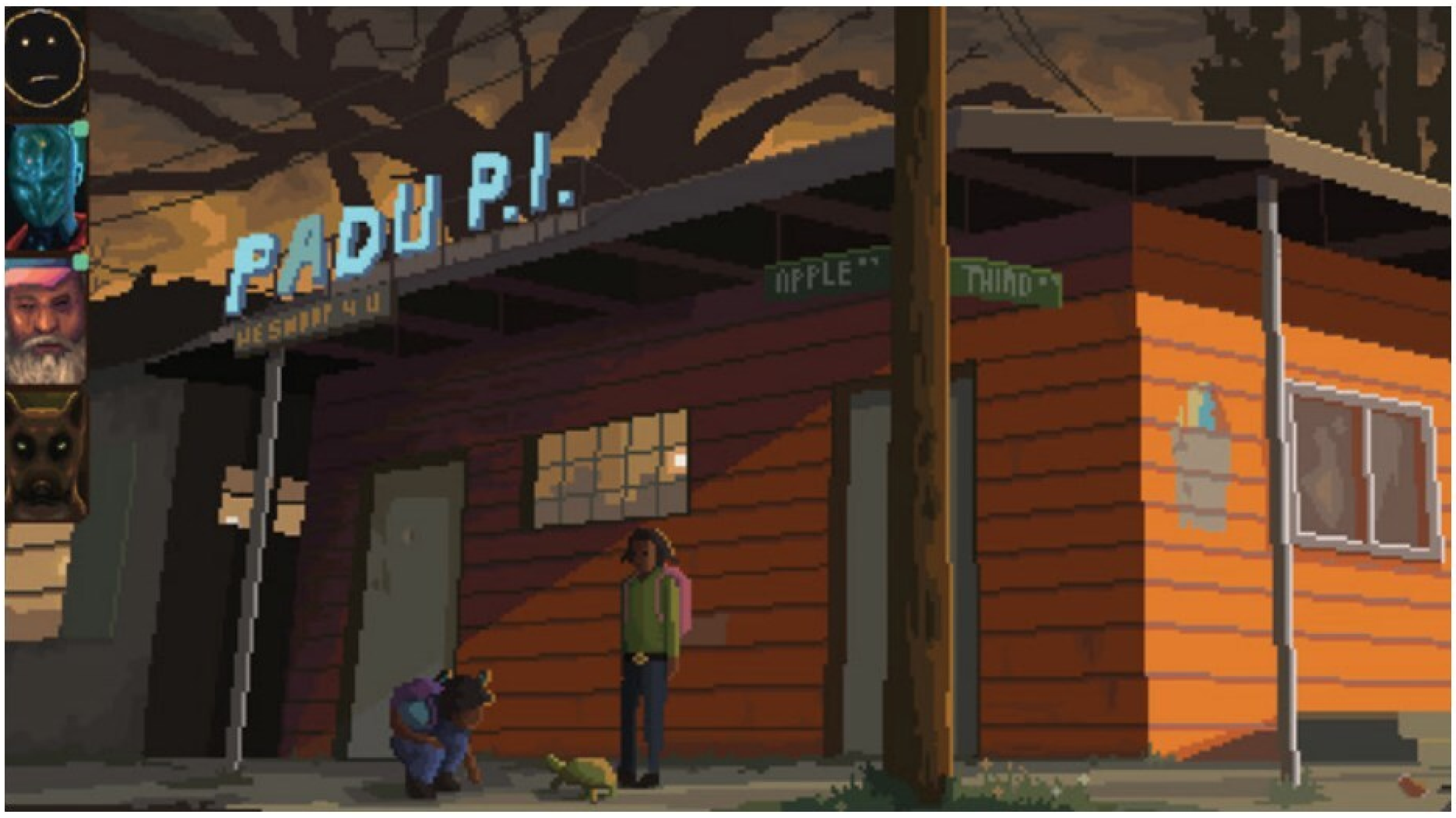
To read all of our reviews, visit GameInformer.com/Reviews



GI MUST PLAY

NORCO

Soul food



Point-and-click games cemented the vast potential of interactive narrative at the turn of the century, employing innovative environmental/dialogue puzzles with evocative pixel art and chiptune music. Nowadays, we lose ourselves in impossibly large sandboxes with equally extensive choice-driven plotlines. It's fitting, then, that Norco feels like a precious relic from the Sierra-led Golden Age of digital adventures. Geography of Robots' debut title ponders unchecked capitalism and classism at the heart of America's oft-neglected Deep South. Moreover, Norco's retrofuturistic and net.art aesthetic is propped up by some of the best surrealist storytelling I've witnessed since Kentucky Route Zero.

Norco reimagines the bayou as a series of interconnected nodes on a map. I bounced around numerous venues, parsing historical manuscripts in rundown shops, buying dog food at the convenience store, fetching hallucinogens from grimy bathroom stalls, and speaking with the citizens. Each vignette pops with psychedelic hues – rivers sparkle beneath the tree line, half-light casts long shadows across grassy knolls, watercolor-clouds form above the empty freeway. Norco's writing might indicate that the town is distorted and diseased, but it's gorgeous to behold, nonetheless.

Protagonist Kay returns just as her titular Louisianan community is on the brink of erasure. Kay's younger brother Blake is nowhere to be found, and her estranged mother, Catherine, recently succumbed to cancer. In the months before her death, Catherine was conducting research on a floating anomaly at a nearby lake, earning the suspicion of evil oil conglomerate Shield. As Kay, I wandered through a weird, modernized Norco, hoping to find Blake and complete Catherine's lifework. Norco teems with delightful twists and frightening realizations that brought me face-to-face with washed-up detectives and grotesque machines, among many other eccentrics. There's a lot of dialogue and world-building, but the prose's dreamlike and philosophical quality makes every text block a joy to read.

On the rare occasion that I had trouble keeping up with the through lines, I accessed Kay's "Mind Map," a smart subversion of the conventional quest log where important objects, NPCs, and locations are linked. Here, I could reminisce about significant events and relationships for additional details, progress the plot, or recall secondary objectives. Norco primarily touts puzzle-based gameplay, but don't be fooled; the loop is chock-full of its fair share of nuance. At one point, a multipart task required me to hover over backdrops with a cellphone camera to reveal invisible solutions, giving revisited areas extra depth and wonder. There are even peripheral puzzles that I could've missed if I hadn't meticulously explored environments with my cursor, masterfully paralleling the enigmatic and illusory nature of the story.

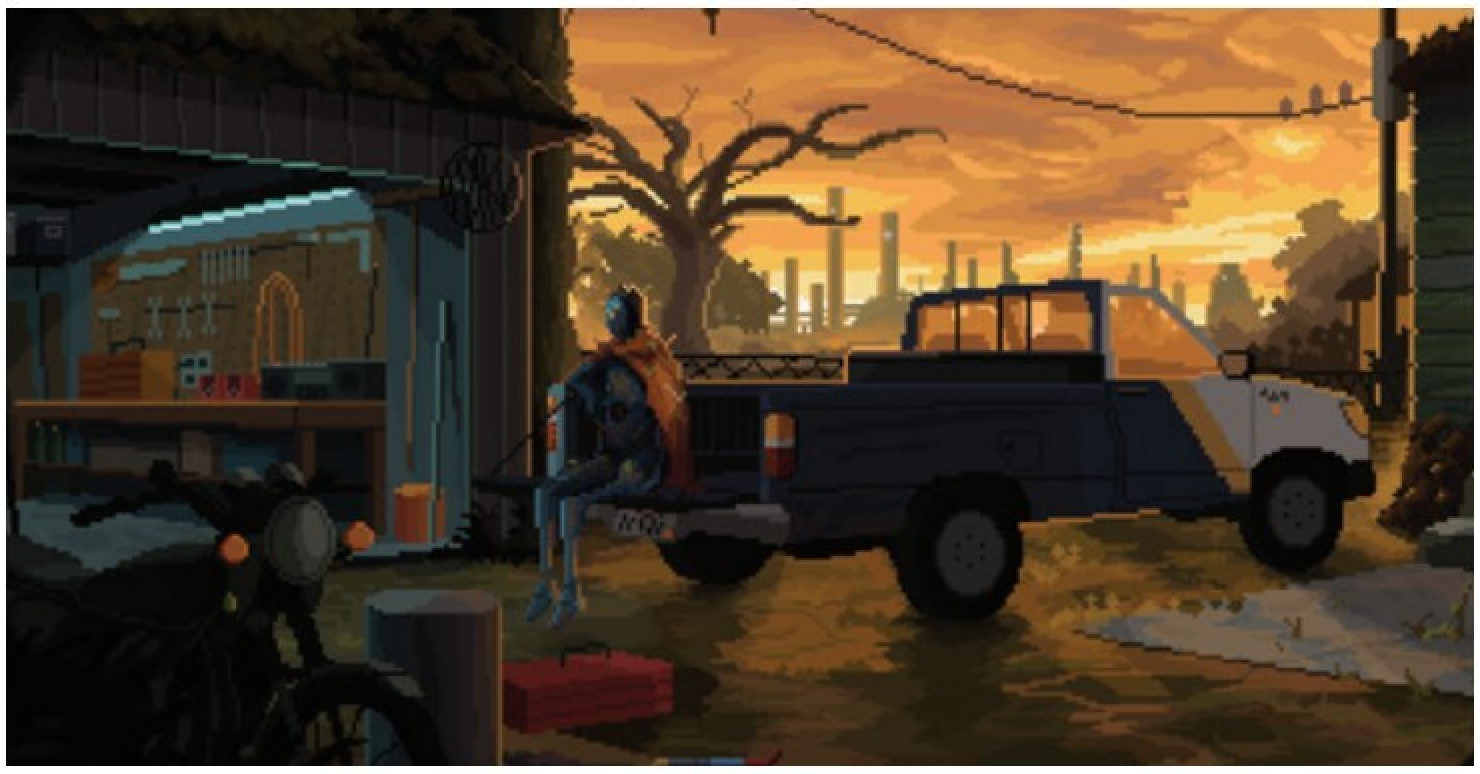
My one gripe with Norco is its tacked-on combat system. From time to time, Kay and her ever-growing band of party members – e.g., a stuffed monkey, a fugitive security droid, etc. – cross paths with aggressors. Attacks are minigames ranging from replicating on-screen patterns to clicking enemy weak spots in timed intervals. I quickly grew weary of these redundant encounters. In a game with several unique design choices, fighting paled in comparison. I'm relieved only a handful of these sequences are required.

I've never played a game like Norco, which elegantly celebrates and admonishes its cultural roots while simultaneously chronicling a strange doomsday scenario. Kay and Catherine's shattered America is not so dissimilar from our own – burgeoning industrial complexes threaten to displace low-income families, automated systems supersede human workers, and the filthy rich work around the clock to deter upward mobility. The game isn't always gloomy; it can't be. One cool night, I sat atop City Hall and gazed at the constellations with a stranger. Hours earlier, I flipped through treasured memories on a faulty flatscreen TV. Norco is an unforgettable reminder that there's an inherent beauty behind the madness.

BY JASON GUISAO

9.25

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Raw Fury
DEVELOPER Geography of Robots **RELEASE** March 24 **RATING** M



LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

Embracing the light and dark side

Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga is a massive game, consisting of roughly 400 playable characters, nine movies to journey through, and more puns, jokes, and sight gags than even Jar Jar Binks can handle. Developer TT Games has been making Lego games for a long time, and this ambitious project shows this studio at the top of its game, delivering brick-smashing fun and wonderfully absurd Star Wars humor from start to finish. While nailing the little moments, the immense scale of the project appears to have been too wide for TT Games to harness, as some of the content is uncharacteristically dull or uneven.

The perfect example of this experience bouncing between highs and lows occurs on the planet Ahch-To, where Luke Skywalker retreats to close himself off to the Force in *The Last Jedi*. In this desolate location, TT Games throws in a silly porg joke wherever possible, and makes Luke Skywalker hilarious to the point that he hums his theme song as he tries to ignore Rey. All of this content spins Star Wars' lore in delightful ways, but the journey to it is often a slog, pushing the player to do little more than run great distances. Along the way, there's little to see or do, and the few diversions that do pop up on Ahch-To lack either the creativity or complexity found within the game's proper levels. The bulk of side content, which is a big part of this experience, mostly comes up short.

For the first time in a Lego Star Wars game, the galaxy can freely be explored when planets are unlocked by completing episodes. TT Games' artists did a phenomenal job recreating these planets; each is teeming with life and plenty of fan service. Tatooine's sprawling Mos Eisley spaceport is densely packed with aliens and vehicles and feels distinctly different than a desolate location like Hoth. All of these locations blend realistic backdrops with clever brick creations that players can interact with.

The Skywalker Saga is at its best within the condensed, story-focused levels, which hark back to this series' earlier designs. Hunting for minikits and kyber blocks is fun, often pushing the player (or couch co-op duo) to solve puzzles or break objects to reveal new paths. These stages are worth replaying when more character classes (such as the Sith) are unlocked. Some minigames are overused, such as R2's terminal hacking, but the moment-to-moment gameplay flow in these levels is smooth and delivers fewer roadblocks than in other Lego Star Wars titles. On the note of R2's hacking, you can earn an upgrade later that allows you to pay to bypass them.

Strong focus is applied to combat, featuring all-new lightsaber techniques and cover-based shooting – both disciplines get the job done in enjoyable ways. Neither offers much depth, but their simplicity works for the conflicts, allowing stormtrooper platoons to fall quickly. Carefully placed headshots knock their helmets off, and yes, you can wear them. Jedi can also through their sabers and use the Force to hurl objects at enemies. These mechanics get stretched out in boss battles and push the player to sew in evasive maneuvers to dodge attacks like Darth Maul's rage-filled charge.

Some stages offer vehicular play to bring Star Wars' intense space battles to life. I had a blast piloting an X-Wing in the Death Star's trench and the Millennium Falcon in an asteroid field. Most of these conflicts lack difficulty, yet deliver plenty of excitement when chaotic storms of TIE fighters encircle your vessel.

The best part of The Skywalker Saga is the pursuit of unlocking all the characters and vehicles. Given how big the adventure is, this is a dizzying proposition, but thankfully, you won't feel like you are digging for a needle in a haystack when looking for a specific character you want. You can exchange well-earned studs for clues that lead to character locations and unlocking requirements. Studs can also be spent to enhance skills and unlock new abilities for the different character classes. I like the newfound depth that TT Games has applied to the tried-and-true Lego formula.

Despite being periodically uneventful, the Skywalker Saga is a thorough and fun examination of all three Star Wars movie trilogies. It delivers the same sensation of being overwhelmed as opening a Blu-ray collection of films and not knowing which one you should start with. The player can bounce between trilogies and veer off a story path at any time to explore the galaxy far, far away. Some discoveries may be as dull as sand, but others may deliver something great, like Babu Frik as a playable character or seeing what Kylo Ren's bedroom looks like.

BY ANDREW REINER

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Warner Bros. Interactive
DEVELOPER TT Games **RELEASE** April 5 **RATING** E10+

WEIRD WEST

Weird West subverts expectations, twisting well-trodden cowboy tropes into dark fantasy vignettes brought to life by immersive sandbox elements.

BY ALEX VAN AKEN

8.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** WolfEye Studios **RELEASE** March 31 **RATING** M

TREK TO YOMI

Sadly, Trek to Yomi feels noticiably outdated for such an aesthetically pleasing game. And its archaic gameplay can't be completely covered up by its artistic black-and-white filter. Trek to Yomi tried to reach the heights of lauded Japanese filmmaking, but unfortunately, it falls almost as flat as its 2D combat plane.

BY JILL GRODT

6.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital **DEVELOPER** Leonard Menchiari, Flying Wild Hog **RELEASE** May 5 **RATING** M

NINTENDO SWITCH SPORTS

After a few fun-filled hours, I experienced all of Nintendo Switch Sports' playable components and occasionally lost interest after long stints of grinding. Switch Sports doesn't step out of Wii Sports' long shadow, but it's still a solid runner-up.

BY JASON GUISAO

7.5

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** April 29 **RATING** E

LOOT RIVER

Loot River reimagines some of its inspirations' best elements, offering players a chance to sail cleverly through each environment, grow powerful enough to slice up once-impossible threats, and unravel a story that smartly weaves into its gameplay. **BY JILL GRODT**

8.5

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Straka.Studio, Superhot Presents **DEVELOPER** Straka.Studio **RELEASE** May 3 **RATING** T

MLB THE SHOW 22

MLB The Show 22 doesn't put up an all-star performance this year, but continues to be consistent in all avenues of play and finds new ways to make you want to spend time at the ballpark.

BY ANDREW REINER ■

8.5

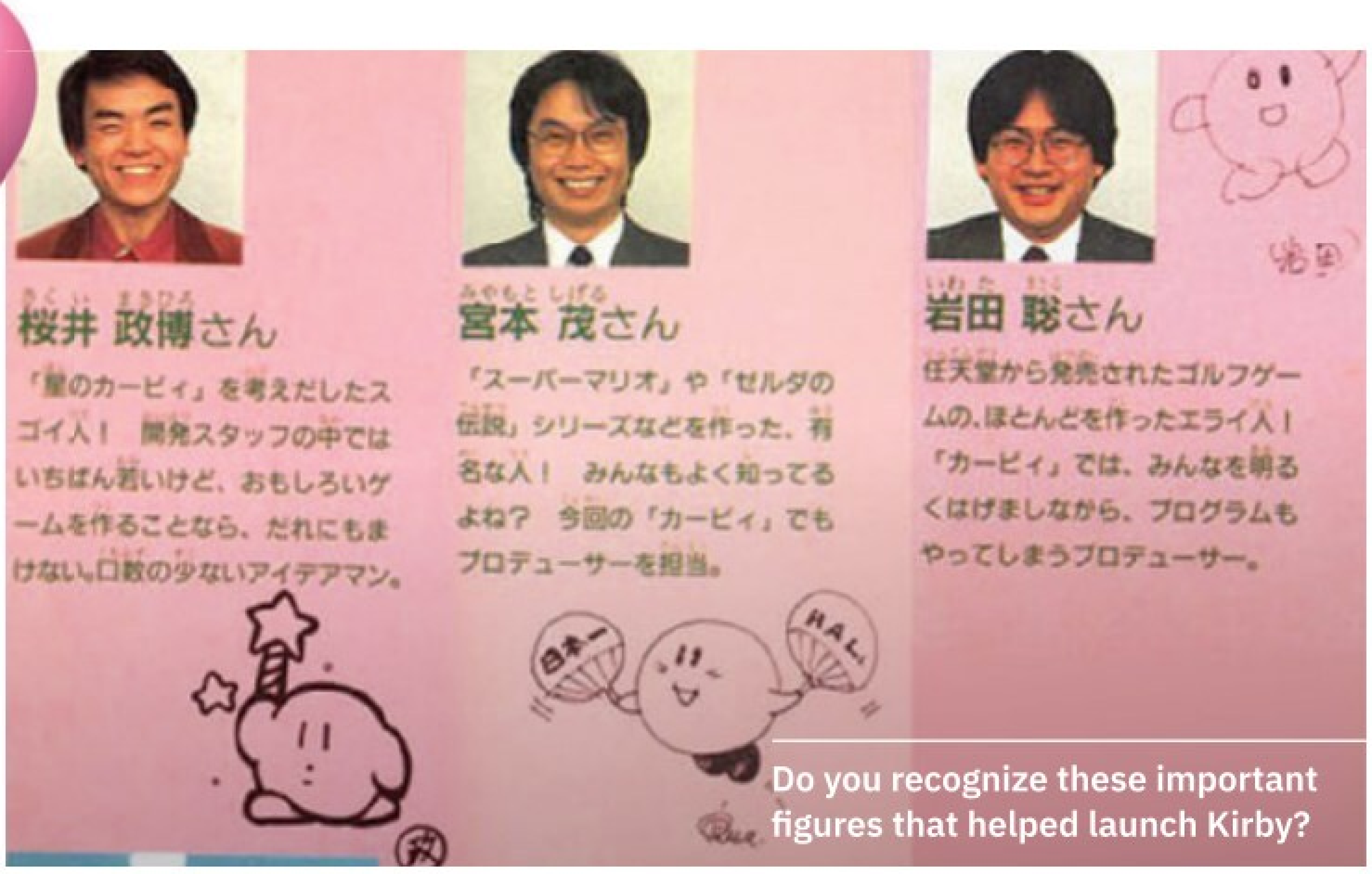
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Sony Interactive Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Sony San Diego Studio **RELEASE** April 5 **RATING** E

KIRBY AND THE WALK DOWN MEMORY LANE

To celebrate Kirby's 30th anniversary, we look back through the franchise's history

BY JILL GRODT

You wouldn't guess it from his child-like appearance, but gaming's much-loved spherical hero is turning 30 this year. Kicking off his first adventure in 1992, Kirby has grown into a juggernaut in the game industry, starring in dozens of titles and making appearances in countless others. The long-running franchise is among video games' best-selling. One of its most successful titles, Kirby and the Forgotten Land, released in March 2022. It's not only breaking series' records but also sucked in a whole new generation of fans. To celebrate the formidable gumball's third decade in the industry, we're looking back at the franchise, from how it started to where it's floating now.



桜井 政博さん

「星のカービィ」を考えだしたスゴイ人！　開発スタッフの中ではいちばん若いけど、おもしろいゲームを作ることなら、だれにもまけない、口数の少ないアイデアマン。

宮本 茂さん

「スーパーマリオ」や「ゼルダの伝説」シリーズなどを作った、有名な人！　みんなもよく知ってるよね？　今回の「カービィ」でもプロデューサーを担当。

岩田 聡さん

任天堂から発売されたゴルフゲームの、ほとんどを作ったエライ人！「カービィ」では、みんなを明るくはげましながら、プログラムもやってしまうプロデューサー。

Do you recognize these important figures that helped launch Kirby?

Kirby Creators and Connections

"Even when our customers played the games we developed, I think they played them thinking, 'This game was developed by Nintendo.' And, well, that wasn't good."

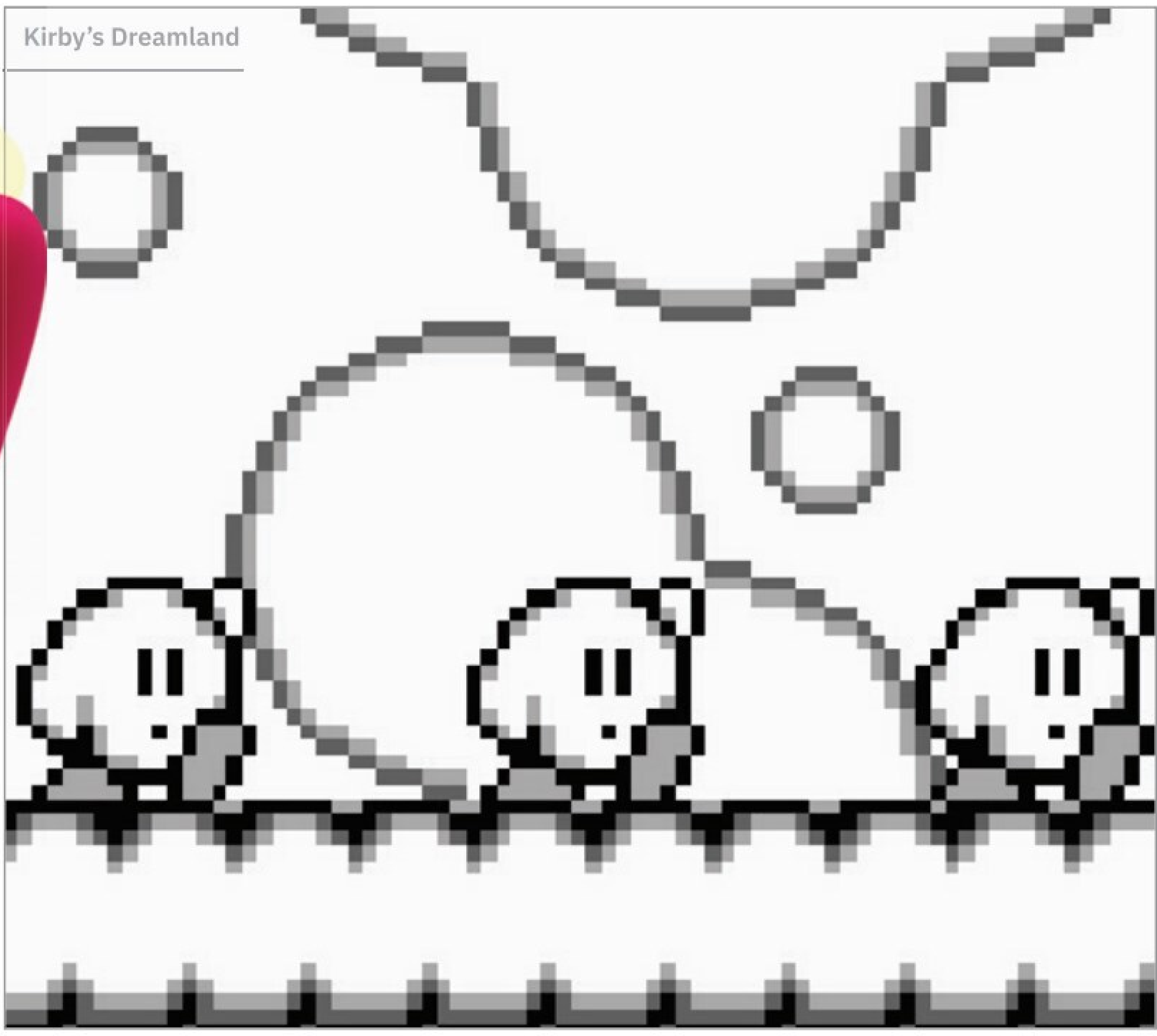
This is how Masayoshi Tanimura, current CEO of Kirby-developer HAL Laboratory, explains the company's unique logo – a dog nestled around three eggs in a nest – on the company's website. The problem of mistaken developer identity has followed the studio throughout the years. Asking who developed the powerful puffball's latest title inevitably leads to a few still guessing Nintendo, while others might suppose his origins lie with the Super Smash Bros. series. While these are off the mark, there is good reason players make the associations, as HAL Laboratory – and Kirby – are intimately linked to both.

The image above comes from an official strategy guide for the pink powerhouse's second title, Kirby's Adventure. It shows three crucial figures in the game's creation attempting to draw the protagonist by hand. Look closely. If you recognize them, you may begin to understand how Kirby connects some of gaming's giants.

On the left is Masahiro Sakurai. Younger fans might recognize Sakurai as the face behind the Super Smash Bros. series, featured in numerous presentations for Ultimate's various character reveals. However, nearly ten years before the original Super Smash Bros. launched on the Nintendo 64, the former HAL Laboratory game director and designer created Kirby.

The figures in the middle and right are Nintendo legends Shigeru Miyamoto and Satoru Iwata, respectively. Miyamoto, famously the designer behind Mario, Zelda, and more, is now one of Nintendo's most familiar faces and directors, but he also played a role in Kirby's development. Speaking to *Game Informer* in 2011, Miyamoto discussed the character's early years, confirming Kirby's name was partially a nod to John Kirby, a lawyer who represented Nintendo.

Satoru Iwata served as Nintendo president before his death in 2015. But before he ascended to that lofty rank, Iwata was a programmer (and later president) at HAL Laboratory working on the formative Kirby titles, among other projects. He had many talents, but free-hand drawing was not among them, judging from the image above.


Kirby's Dreamland

Beginning the Dream

Kirby did not have his now-iconic copy powers when he first flew onto the 8-bit scene, but the character nonetheless spent the early games transforming. When Sakurai began work on what would eventually become Kirby's Dream Land, he created a quick, spherical model for the main character. It was meant as a placeholder until the team could mockup a more intricate design. Fans will never know what that more sophisticated character might have looked like because the developers grew attached to the simplistic and cute figure. With a few tweaks, Kirby's round form was born.

The name of the protagonist, as well as the game, was in flux throughout development. Kirby was originally dubbed Popopo, and thus the various titles the studio entertained for the game included this nomenclature. The continuous alterations led to the franchise's first title getting a few interesting marketing variations. For example, it's possible to find published references to Twinkle Popo, an early game title, and Kirby's Dream Land's official North American cover art features a pale protagonist rather than the pink one Sakurai envisioned.

Throughout the '90s, the franchise's lore grew along with Kirby's powers. The initial title introduced his home – Dream Land on Planet Popstar – series antagonist King Dedede, and Kirby's all-consuming talents. The next installment debuted the pastel puffball's unique ability to take on the abilities and appearance of those he gobbled up. The success was almost immediate, encouraging the creators to make direct follow-ups to the mainline titles and branch out into spinoffs. Kirby invaded pinball machines, took up golf, and tried his hand at puzzles. However, with a new generation of Nintendo hardware on the horizon, Sakurai's creation was about to step into the next level.

Kirby Games Through The Years

1992
Kirby's Dream Land
Game Boy

1993
Kirby's Adventure
NES

1995
Kirby's Dream Land 2
Game Boy

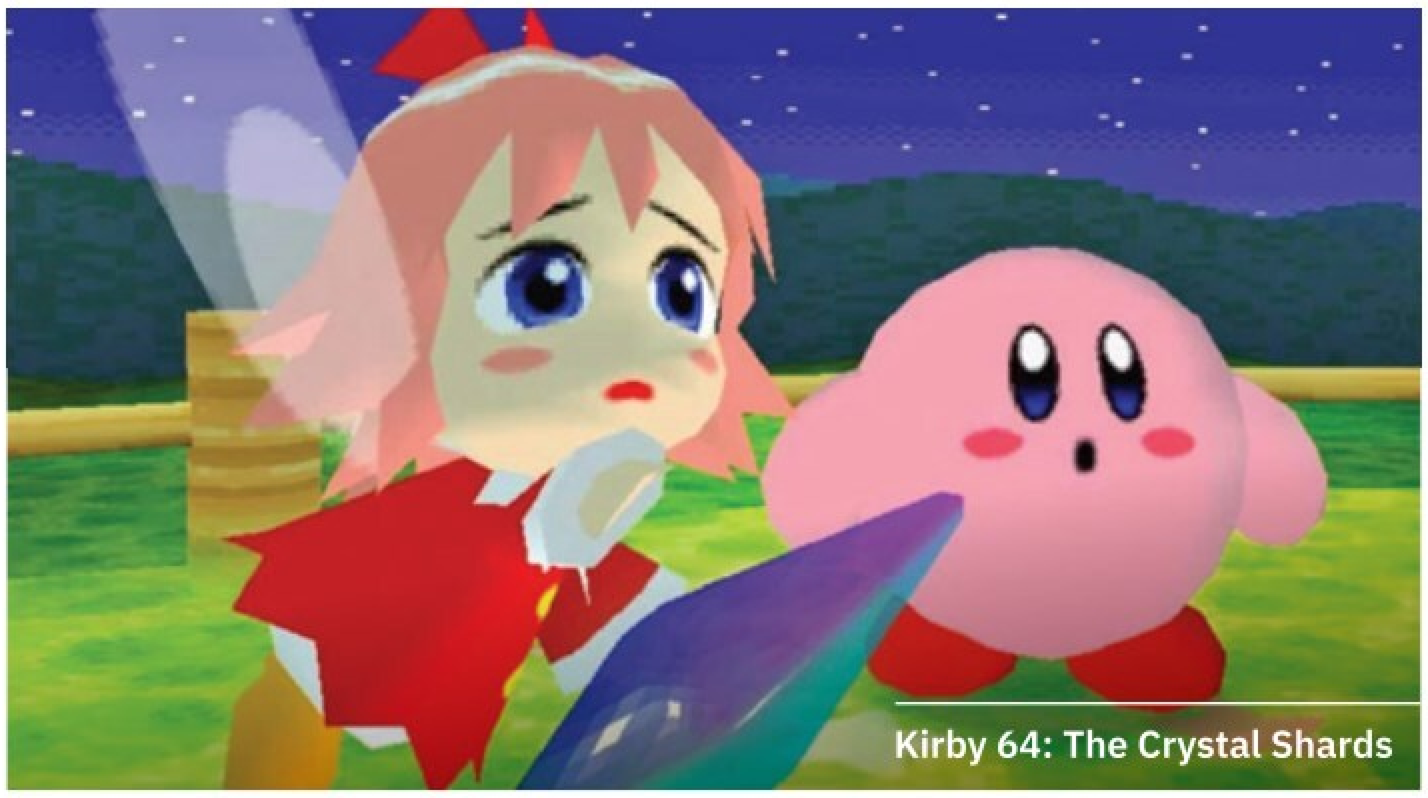
1996
Kirby Super Star
SNES

1997
Kirby's Dream Land 3
SNES

2000
Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards
Nintendo 64

2002
Kirby: Nightmare in Dream Land
Game Boy Advance

2004
Kirby & The Amazing Mirror
Game Boy Advance



Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards

Another Dimension

The franchise's first game starring Kirby in all his puffy, 3D glory was Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards. Despite the new frontier, the gameplay didn't alter radically. This title was, at heart, a 2D side-scroller with a cool, new look. While this was the first Kirby game with 3D graphics, it certainly wasn't the first time the character had been in a HAL Laboratory game flirting with 3D.

The year before Kirby 64 was released, Sakurai debuted a Nintendo-centric fighting game pitting the publisher's biggest icons against each other, called Super Smash Bros. Kirby earned a place on the initial roster, attracting a new audience. Sakurai became increasingly less involved with the development of Kirby's 3D titles, and in 2003, left HAL Laboratory. Despite the creator's absence, the franchise continued floating along into the new era with a mostly warm reception from fans and critics alike.

Looking Back, Moving Forward

Throughout the later 2000s, the franchise's major titles stayed firmly rooted in the past. Even 11 years after Kirby leaped into 3D, games like Kirby's Return to Dreamland stuck to the signature side-scrolling formula. The following year, HAL Laboratory marked the character's 20th anniversary with a Wii collection that included six early entries.

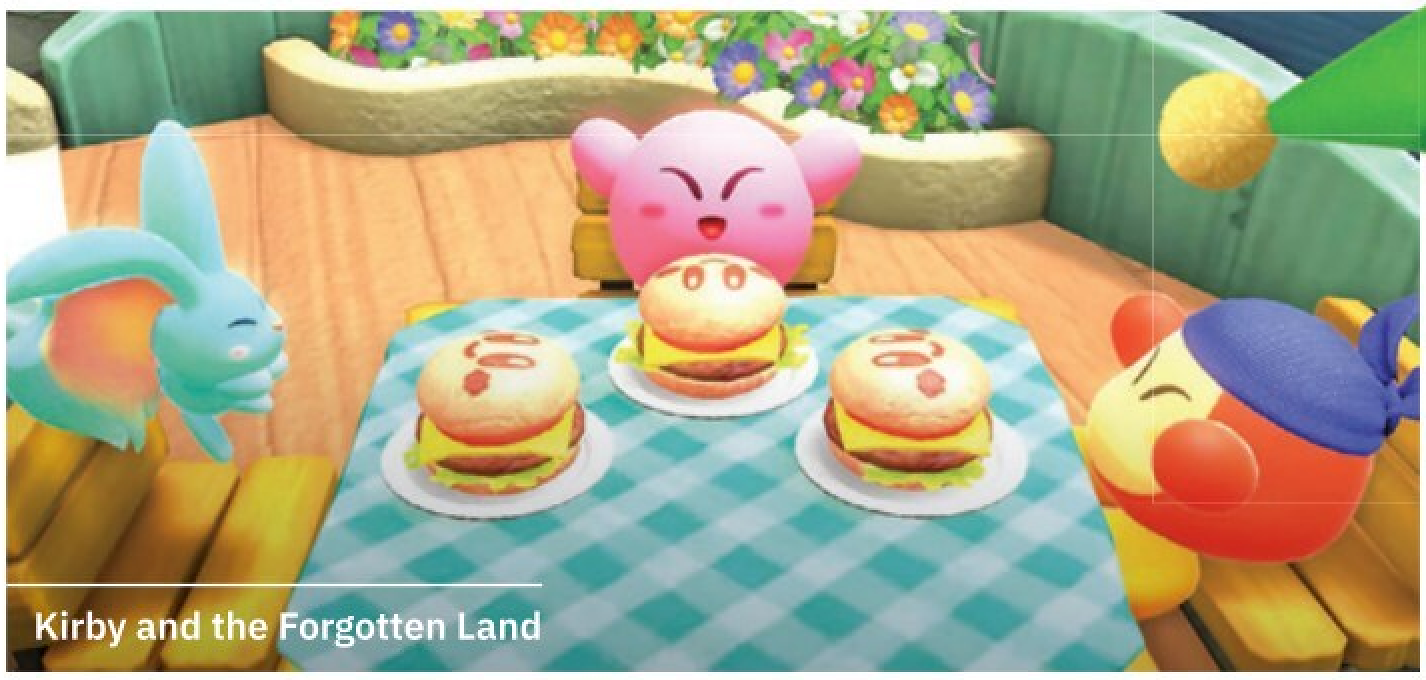
Though Kirby made his way onto a dozen different platforms with steady game releases over many years, his most recent adventure proved the pink hero can still pull out some surprises. Kirby and the Forgotten Land was the franchise's first foray into an open-world-like structure, and the new direction is paying off.

According to a report by *GamesIndustry.biz*, the title broke the series' launch records in the U.K., outselling the previous first-week record-holder nearly three times over. Interestingly, its predecessor was fellow Switch title Kirby Star Allies. It seems the mascot is gaining momentum on the latest-gen Nintendo console, and fans are more excited than ever to see where Kirby goes next. ■

QUICK TAKE

Kirby has had quite a career, from becoming a transforming pink puff to an unstoppable force in Super Smash Bros. I first fell in love with his antics in Kirby's Adventure, and the possibilities for Kirby have only grown from there. Whether being a ball of yarn or piloting a mech, an undeniable amount of creativity and cuteness accompany every adventure.

– KIMBERLEY WALLACE



Kirby and the Forgotten Land

2006

Kirby Squeak Squad
Nintendo DS

2008

Kirby: Super Star Ultra
Nintendo DS

2011

Kirby's Return to Dream Land
Wii

2012

Kirby's Dream Collection
Wii

2014

Kirby: Triple Deluxe
Nintendo 3DS

2016

Kirby: Planet Robobot
Nintendo 3DS

2018

Kirby Star Allies
Nintendo Switch

2022

Kirby and the Forgotten Land
Nintendo Switch

ONE LAST THING

HORROR OR COMEDY – WHICH IS HARDER?

FOR THIS ISSUE'S COVER STORY, we spoke with Glen Schofield about his team's new project, Callisto Protocol (pg. 36), which draws inspiration from his early work on Dead Space. The game director has a 30-plus-year history in gaming across various genres, including early comedy and animation projects for franchises like *Ren & Stimpy*, *Rocky and Bullwinkle*, and *Home Alone*.

"I think it's easier to do comedy, believe it or not, because you can be sarcastic, you can be, well, there's all different types of humor." Schofield says. "And there's a lot of just situational humor and looking at the world. Horror is pretty hard to do. Comedy, I just felt it came a little easier. The timing is even harder on horror than it is on comedy. The timing is down to the hundredth of a second, especially with the sound, like a stinger. It's got to be right. If it's off by a tenth of a second, it's not scary, it's weird." ■

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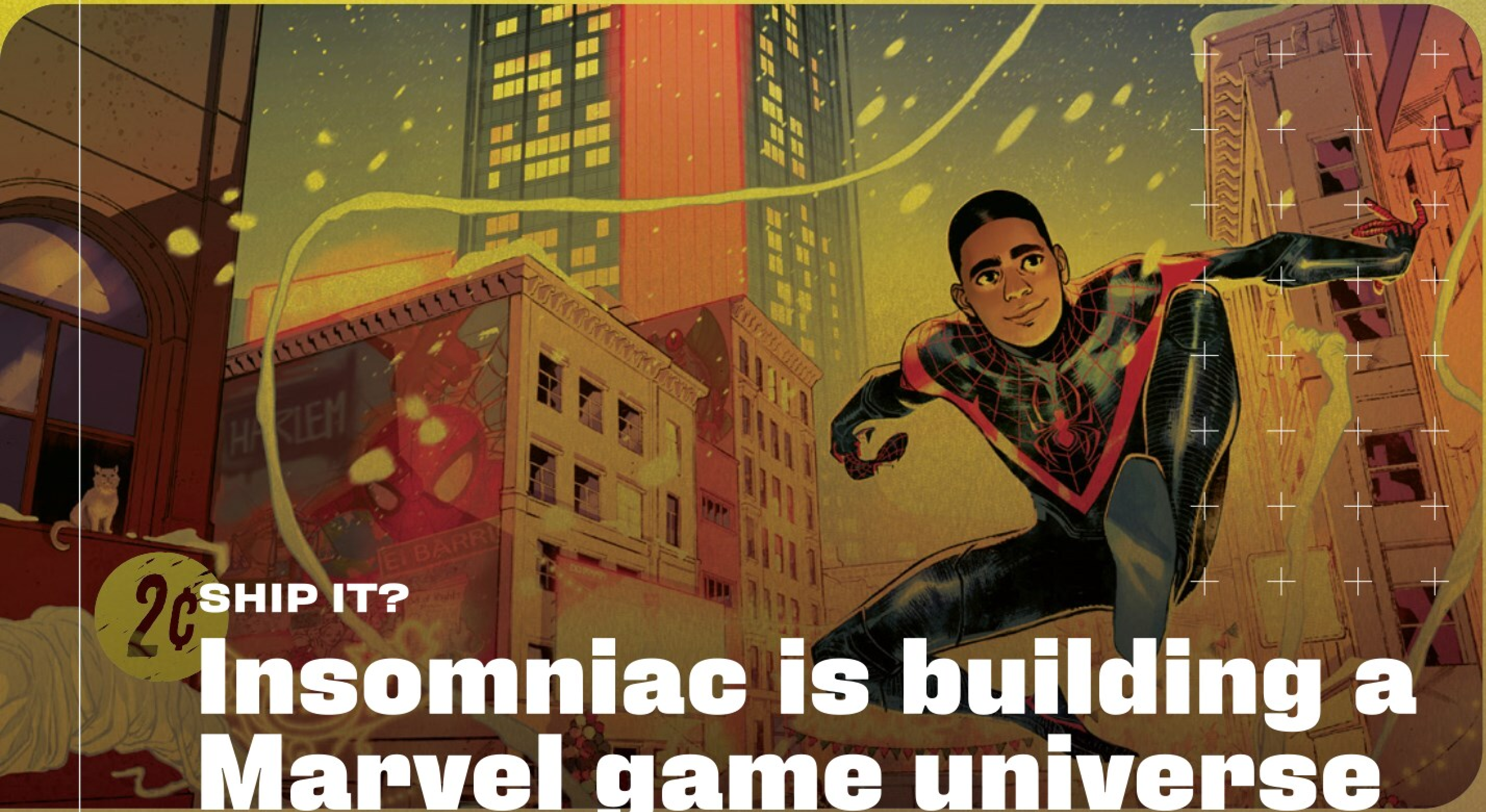

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The
Callisto
Protocol